

TOM MERRY'S CHALLENGE ! SPARKLING COMPLETE SCHOOL AND CRICKET YARN INSIDE !

The **GEM** 2^d



CHAPTER I.

Tom Merry's Innings.

"WELL hit!"
"Oh,
well hit,
Tom!"

It was a ringing shout from fifty throats. Half Clavering had gathered round the school cricket ground to watch Tom Merry at the wicket. The Shell were playing the Lower Fifth, and the match was turning out to be one of unusual keenness and interest, for the Shell, although the lower Form of the two, was getting decidedly the best of the game, much to the surprise of the Fifth Form.

The Lower Fifth were all out for 96—a sufficiently respectable score—and they expected the Shell, who went in second, to make about forty or fifty. It was a single innings match, and the heroes of the Lower Fifth expected it to end long before the

limit of the time appointed for drawing the stumps.

The Shell were five down for 18 when Tom Merry went in to bat, with Monty Lowther at the other end. The Fifth watched that innings with indulgent smiles at first; but gradually the smiles disappeared, and the faces lengthened, for Tom Merry was batting in a quite unexpected manner.

By the time he had knocked up 35 off his own bat the Lower Fifth fellows were looking dubiously at one another, and the Shell were cheering wildly; and now, as a tremendous drive sent the leather whizzing right over the pavilion, the cheers from Tom Merry's supporters grew louder than ever.

"Well hit, Tom!"

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry stood with his bat on the crease, and a cheerful smile upon his pleasant, frank face. There was no need to run out that hit, for it was a boundary.

"Hurrah!" shouted Manners from the pavilion.

Manners, the Shell captain, was down on the list to go in next, but he was in no hurry. He had donned pads and gloves, but it looked as if he had been a little too "previous." Monty Lowther was keeping up his end like a Trojan, and Tom Merry was making all the running.

"Oh, rats!" said Gore, growling. Gore was out for a duck's egg, so naturally he wasn't in the best of humours. "I never saw such flukes in my life as that chap's batting!"

Manners grinned.

"If you could have made a few flukes in the same way, Gore, you wouldn't have been out with a big, round nought," he remarked. "But you're talking rot, and you know it. Tom Merry is the best batsman in the Shell—yes, or in any Form at Clavering, except the Sixth itself!"

Gore sneered.

"You'd better challenge the Upper Fifth!" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "With such a wonder as Tom Merry in the team, the Lower Fifth are too small game for you!"

"My hat!" said Manners. "I'll do it, too! That's a

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good idea of yours, Gore. Devigne and his lot are rather given to crowing over us, and with Tom Merry in our team, I really believe we could settle their hash!"

"Oh, what rot!" said Gore, in disgust. "The fuss you make of that chap is sickening!"

But Manners was no longer listening. The ball had come in, and Tom Merry was batting again. The best bowler in the Lower Fifth had been put on, but hitherto without any very glorious results. The over had given Tom twelve, so far. The bowler sent down the last ball of it with all the skill he had.

Clack!

The quick, staccato sound of wood meeting leather, and the ball went whizzing away, away, long field, and Tom and Monty

and away, deep into the long field, and Tom and Monty Lowther were running.

Once, twice—yes, thrice! How they scudded! Three times across the pitch, like streaks of white crossing the level green; and Monty Lowther was for running again, but Tom Merry waved his hand warningly and shook his head.

"No, Monty!" he shouted.

And Monty clumped his bat on the crease again. Tom was right. The ball came hurtling in to the wicket-keeper, who, with rather an injured look on his face, tossed it to the bowler. He had badly wanted Tom Merry to attempt that fourth run, when he would have run him out for a certainty.

But Tom knew a little too much for that. Tom had never played cricket before he came to Clavering, but he had learned rapidly there, and he was apparently a born cricketer. Manners was probably right when he declared that, outside the Sixth Form, Clavering had not a batsman to equal Tom Merry.

The field crossed over, and as the last hit had been for three, Tom Merry still had the bowling; and the Shell junior was now getting nicely set. He cut away the first ball of the next over for two, and the second gave him a boundary. The third

and fourth he stopped dead, the fifth gave him two, and the last ball three; and not once had his wicket been in danger.

The score of the Shell was now 71, of which number 53 belonged to Tom Merry individually, and he still seemed as fresh as paint.

The ball coming next gave him three more, and then Lowther had the bowling. Alas for Monty! The bowler saw his chance at last, and a curling yorker left Monty Lowther's wicket a wreck, and Monty carried out his bat for eight.

Six wickets down for 74!

Manners picked up his bat, and passed Monty Lowther coming in. He grinned cheerfully at Tom Merry as he took his place at the vacant wicket.

Manners survived three overs, making ten runs before his wicket fell. Meanwhile, Tom was batting strongly, and

—SCHOOL YARN OF THE WEEK, BOYS!

CHALLENGE!

Long Complete
Yarn of TOM
MERRY & Co.

By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

his score was going up. The figure for the Shell stood at 90 when Manners carried out his bat.

Gilbert Felgate, captain of Clavering, strolled up as Manners went back to the pavilion. The captain had come to look on at the match, and he was as surprised as the rest by the discovery of a budding Hobbs in the Shell.

"You've got a good man there, Manners!" Felgate remarked. "A sort of dark horse, eh, that you've been keeping in hand to surprise the Lower Fifth?"

Manners laughed.

"Well, he has surprised them, Felgate!"

"Yes, by Jove, and me, too! I wonder if I've found the batsman I want for the First Eleven?" murmured Felgate, speaking to himself.

But Manners caught the words, and his eyes blazed with excitement.

"Felgate, you couldn't do better! Tom Merry is the finest cricketer at Clavering outside the top Form. You've got a man from the Upper Fifth, why shouldn't you have one from the Shell? And Tom's a coughdrop, Felgate, I tell you!"

"I can see that for myself," said Felgate, with a good-humoured smile. "His form is a bit unexpected, but if it isn't simply a fluke—"

"Of course it isn't! He's—"

"Well, we shall see."

"Next man in!" said Manners. "That's you, Jimson."

"Right-ho!" said Jimson. "I'll see Merry 'not out,' if you like."

And he joined Tom at the wickets. Felgate watched with keen interest as the next over started. The captain of Clavering was considerably troubled in his mind about the constitution of the Clavering First. The college team was by no means as strong as he would have liked to see it, and some of the opening fixtures of the season had found it wanting. Clavering had been beaten by two different schools, and had drawn in the match with High Clavering Town, but not a single victory had yet given them any laurels to boast of.

And so the cricket captain had made some changes in the First Eleven, and with an unsparing hand. As he said, he didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but he meant Clavering to do something better than get licked all through the summer. Some of the weak players had gone, but exactly how to fill all the vacant places Felgate had not yet decided.

Devigne of the Upper Fifth had a claim to be considered, for there was no material in the Sixth for Felgate to choose from; and now, for the first time, it occurred to the captain that he might find what he wanted lower down in the school than the Fifth Form, and so he watched Tom Merry with keen interest.

The Shell were seven down for 90, and it certainly looked as if the lower of the contending Forms would win the match, and with a margin of wickets to spare, and that unusual result would be the outcome of Tom Merry's form at the wicket. Tom would probably finish "not out."

Jimson took a single, which gave Tom the bowling again. The bowler knew how much depended upon that over, and he put his best into it. Away went the ball from the swiping bat, away into the long field, and the fieldsmen were running frantically; and the batsmen were running, too—once, twice, thrice—yes, four!

But the ball was whizzing in. Tom Merry, with the batsman's true instinct, knew the danger, and put on a spurt, and the willow clumped on the crease in the nick of time. There was a crash of falling balls; but the umpire shook his head.

"Not out!"

It had been a narrow shave, but a miss was as good as a mile. Tom breathed again, and Felgate smiled.

Ninety-five for the Shell. One more to equalise, two more to win! Down comes the ball again, and with a beautiful late cut Tom Merry sends it on its journey—away, and away!

The fieldsmen were still panting after the elusive leather when a mighty

shout from the Shell told that the necessary couple have been run, and that the game was won with three wickets to spare. The level green was black with boys the next moment.

"Hurrah for Tom Merry!"

"Three cheers for the Shell!"

"Hurrah!"

And Tom was slapped on the back and thumped in the ribs till he was more breathless than if he had run out half a dozen fours; and as he came off the ground, in the midst of an enthusiastic crowd, Felgate met him at the pavilion and slapped him on the shoulder.

"I've had my eye on you, Merry. You've played a great game, and if you keep up that form I may find you room in the First Eleven!"

And Tom flushed with pleasure. To play in Clavering First was the dream of every Upper Form boy, and for that honour to fall to a boy in the Shell was almost unheard of.

"Do you mean it, Felgate?" he gasped.

"Rather!"

And Edgar Devigne, standing by, gritted his teeth, for he knew that if the batsman of the Shell found a place in the First Eleven, there would be no room for a batsman from the Upper Fifth.

Several times before he had come into hostile contact with Tom Merry, and it seemed that Tom was destined to be his rival again.

CHAPTER 2.

The Challenge!

"LET us eat, drink, and be merry!" exclaimed Manners.

The Shell were at home again in the study. They had changed their cricketer flannels for ordinary attire, and were feeling as hungry as hunters. Tea in the study was always a cosy meal, the only unpleasant element being Gore. Gore always went out of his way to make himself disagreeable to Tom Merry.

Tom was looking very pleased with himself and things in general. He had won the match with the Lower Fifth for his Form, and the school captain's words were very gratifying. His chums were equally pleased. To have a boy out of the Shell in the First Eleven was an honour the whole Form would appreciate. It would also be "one



in the eye" for Devigne and the Upper Fifth generally, who were inclined to look down upon the heroes of the middle school and treat them as if they were still juniors, which, of course, was a deadly insult to the Shell.

"Let us eat, drink, and— Pass the sardines!" said Manners. "Two lumps in my tea, Monty! Tom, old son, you've done us proud to-day!"

"It was a jolly good game!" said Tom Merry, between two mouthfuls. "Do you think what the skipper said is likely to come to anything?"

"Very likely. Felgate never talks out of his hat; and, besides, you know, you bat better than Devigne any day in the week."

"Oh, rot!" said Gore.

"You shut up!" said Manners. "Scoff your sardines, and give us a rest! Besides," went on Manners, with a grin, "I've got an idea."

"Where did you pinch it?" sneered Gore.

"My dear kid, I got it from you. Yes, chaps; it was Gore's notion. We're going to challenge the Upper Fifth to deadly strife on the cricket pitch, and beat them, too!"

"Why don't you challenge the Sixth while you're about it?" sneered Gore.

"Because that would be too big a lump for us to chew," said Manners, "and we've nothing to gain by licking them if we could. But if we beat Devigne and his lot, it will put it beyond all question that Tom Merry ought to go into Clavering First, and not Devigne."

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther.

"Rot!" said Gore.

"Didn't you say it was Gore's idea, Manners?" asked Tom.

"Yes. So it is."

"I was only joking!" snarled Gore. "Of course, I didn't think Manners would be such a silly idiot as to take my advice!"

"Well, as a rule, a chap would be a silly idiot to take your advice," agreed Manners. "I'm not denying that, of course. But sometimes out of the mouths of babes and sucklings—"

"Oh, dry up!"

"Anyway, we're going to do it!" said Manners. "And when we've finished tea, I'm going to write out the challenge."

"Devigne won't accept it," said Tom Merry, with a shake of the head. "He'll say that it's beneath the dignity of his Form to meet a lot of kids. They call us kids in the Upper Fifth. Kids!"

"Then we'll chip him into doing it," declared Manners. "We'll let all Clavering know that he's afraid to meet an eleven out of the Shell."

"Well, that ought to bring him up to time."

"You bet your Sunday boots it will!" chuckled Manners. "Why, we'll get Felgate on his track if he tries to get out of it. We'll make his giddy life a burden till he agrees to come up to the scratch. And then we'll lick him!"

"I fancy I can see you doing it!" jeered Gore.

"Well, I hope you can't fancy yourself in the eleven that will be doing it," replied Manners, "because you'll be disappointed!"

"Do you mean to say you'd leave me out?" demanded Gore, with a scowl.

"Yes, rather! We don't want any more duck's eggs!"

"Well, I think it's a jolly good idea!" said Tom Merry.

"What—to leave Gore out of the team?"

"No," said Tom, laughing. "To challenge the Upper Fifth, I mean. As for playing Gore or not, that's for you to settle, as captain of the Form team. Let's get the challenge written. Who'll take it to the Fifth Form room?"

"You'd better take it yourself, and get your head knocked off!" said Gore.

"I'll take it willingly enough!" said Tom instantly.

"We'll all take it," said Manners. "Don't you remember the time when the Upper Fifth sent us a deputation when you were setting up to be elected captain of Clavering, Tom? Well, we'll go in a giddy deputation to them now, to return the compliment. Any more sardines there? No? All right, now we'll write the challenge."

The study table was cleared. Manners produced pens, ink, and paper. The chums put their heads together over the concoction of the challenge to the Upper Fifth Form. As Manners said, such a challenge wasn't sent every day, and it had to be done in proper style.

"How's that?" said the captain of the Shell thoughtfully. "The Shell present their compliments to the Upper Fifth, and would be pleased to lick them on the cricket field."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Too cocky," he said. "They might lick us."

"Not likely!"

"Well, they might, you know, and then we should look

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asses if we crowed too much beforehand. Nothing like being modest about it."

"Well, I'll put in 'meet' instead of 'lick,' said Manners, admitting the force of Tom's argument. "Would be pleased to meet them on the cricket field and decide, by playing the game, which Form knows the most about cricket." That all right?"

"Good!"

"The Shell are ready and willing to arrange such meeting for any half-holiday the Upper Fifth like to name," went on Manners, pencilling as he spoke. "They trust that the Upper Fifth will see their way—to see their way sounds awfully businesslike—will see their way to accept this challenge, as otherwise the school may think that they are afraid—"

"Who are afraid?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Who? The Upper Fifth, of course!"

Manners went on.

"They trust that the Upper Fifth may see their way to accept this challenge, as otherwise the school may think they are afraid to meet them; and if their challenge is declined they will know that they can't play cricket for nuts."

"Who's 'they'?" asked Monty doubtfully. "I'm not finding faults, Manners, but ain't there too many pronouns in that?"

"Well, I'll cross some of them out," said Manners obligingly. "It doesn't seem to read very well without them, though," he went on. "Look here, if you can't understand plain English, Monty—"

"Is that plain English?"

"Of course it is, you silly cuckoo!" said Manners crossly.

"Well, what would you call mixed, then? There's too many 'theys.' I appeal to Merry."

"It does seem a bit tangled," said Tom thoughtfully. "Lend me your pencil."

He made a few alterations.

Manners read out the amended document.

"The Shell present their compliments to the Upper Fifth, and would be pleased to meet them on the cricket field to decide, by playing the game, which Form knows the most about cricket. The Shell are ready and willing to arrange such meeting for any half-holiday the Upper Fifth like to name, and they trust that the Upper Fifth will see their way to accept the challenge; otherwise the school may think that the Upper Fifth are afraid. If this challenge is declined, the Shell will know that the Upper Fifth can't play cricket for toffee!"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Manners. "I can't see that it's much improved, but it'll do. Anything for a quiet life. Now to interview the Upper Fifth."

A fair copy of the amended document was carefully written out, and the chums rose.

"Are you coming, Gore?" asked Manners.

Gore had watched the whole proceeding with a sneer upon his face.

"No, I'm not!" snapped Gore. "You can go and make silly asses of yourselves without any assistance!"

"I don't know. That sort of thing is more in your line," said Manners. "However, stay here if you like. Your room's better than your company any day. Come on, chaps!"

Tom Merry carried the precious document, and, with his chums on either side, he marched off cheerfully to the Fifth Form room.

CHAPTER 3.

A Shock for the Upper Fifth.

EDGAR DEVIGNE, captain of the Upper Fifth Form at Clavering, was deep in a discussion with his chum Cary. Devigne was looking sombre and ill-tempered.

"It's a rotten shame!" he said. "The fuss they make of that chap Merry is sickening. They came near electing him captain of Clavering—him a kid in the Shell! I don't quite know why he didn't get in, but I believe he could have if he had liked."

"I believe so, too," agreed Cary. "He's very popular. There would have been a row, though. The Fifth would never have stood it."

"And are we going to stand the latest?" demanded Devigne.

"What's the latest?"

"You heard what Felgate said about shoving that fellow into the First?"

"Yes, it's sickening!" said Cary. "I suppose Felgate feels that he owes him something, for he would never have got in as captain if Merry had not stood out of it on his own accord. Perhaps he's going to make it up to him by sticking him in the First Eleven."

"You know what it means, Cary? If he were a bowler

I wouldn't care. But he's a batsman, and so am I. If he goes in I shall have to stand out."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Cary. "Fancy a fellow in the Shell being chosen before a senior of the Upper Fifth!"

"But there's no arguing with Felgate when he's made up his mind."

"We won't stand it, all the same. We'll make a scene about it. Mr. Railton ought to forbid anything of the kind. I have an idea that he stopped Merry from becoming captain. Perhaps he'll step in here."

Devigne shook his head.

"This is a different kind of matter," he said gloomily. "He couldn't interfere. It's for the cricket captain to decide. But"—the Upper Fifth captain ground his teeth—

"I'm not going to stand it, Cary. If they decide to put Merry in I'll keep him out somehow, by fair means or foul!"

"Sh!" said Cary warningly. "Here comes the bounder!"

The three chums of the Shell had entered and were coming towards them.

Devigne looked at them with a scowl, and then at the written paper in Tom Merry's hand, wondering what they wanted, but prepared to give them a hostile reception, whatever it was.

"Hallo!" growled Cary. "What are you kids doing here?"

"Kid yourself!" said Monty. "Lantern-jawed ass I call you!"

Cary jumped up with a threatening look.

"Say that again, Lowther!"

"Lantern-jawed—" began Monty, willing to oblige. But Tom Merry interrupted him.

"Shut up, Monty! We didn't come here to row!"

"Well, he asked me—"

"Chuck it! Cary, keep your wool on. We're on a mission of peace."

"What do you want, Spooney?"

It was the name that had been bestowed on Tom Merry when he first came to Clavering, and at one time it would have ruffled his equanimity, but now he only smiled.

"We've come to give you this challenge."

"That—that what?"

"Challenge!" said Tom cheerfully.

"You'll understand when you read it!"

He handed it to Devigne, who, in his astonishment, took it mechanically. A number of Fifth Form fellows, who had heard Tom's words, were gathering round, wondering what it all meant.

Devigne read the challenge, and his brow grew very black.

Tom Merry waited, with a smile on his face, for Devigne to finish.

The captain of the Upper Fifth crumpled the paper in his hand, and lifted his eyes to Tom's cheerful face, with a black frown.

"So this is some more of your cheek, Merry?"

"Cheek!" said Tom. "I don't see where the cheek comes in. What's your answer?"

Devigne calmly took the paper and tore it across; then placed the pieces together and tore them across again. Then he flung the pieces into the grate.

"That's my answer," he said.

Tom watched his proceedings with an air of genial interest.

"Thanks!" he said. "It's awfully interesting! But I'm no good at guessing the meaning of dumb show. That's all very well for a movie, but what does it mean?"

Devigne flushed red as some of his Form-fellows giggled.

"It means that fellows in the Fifth don't play games with

kids!" he exclaimed scornfully. "That's what it means, so get out!"

"You refuse the challenge?"

"Yes," snapped Devigne. "I've said so. Now clear!"

"What's it all about?" demanded Saunders. "What does he want, Devigne?"

"Oh, it's only some more of his rotten cheek!" said Devigne.

But Tom Merry did not intend that the Upper Fifth should be left in ignorance of his challenge. He cast a glance round at the interested faces.

"You see," he remarked, "we fellows of the Shell rather fancy our cricket, and as we feel pretty certain that we could lick the Upper Fifth in a fair fight—"

"What!" was the general yell.

"That we could lick the Upper Fifth in a fair fight," went on Tom imperturbably, "we have challenged your captain to meet us in a match on the cricket ground."

"Likely! A lot of kids!"

"I'm sorry to see that you're afraid," said Tom. "It's rather a come-down for Clavering to have a Fifth Form without the pluck of a giddy mouse!"

"Who's afraid?" roared twenty voices.

"Well, Devigne is, for one; and so are you all if you let him sneak out of the match," said Tom Merry calmly.

"But I hope you'll think better of it."



Tom's head went like a battering-ram at the man's chest, and Honest Jim was completely bowled over!

"We'll make you think better of coming here to cheek us!" explained Cary, jumping up again. "Collar them, chaps, and chuck them out!"

"Here, hands off!" cried Tom. "It's pax. We came here peacefully—"

"Pax be blown! There wasn't anything of the kind agreed on. You came here to cheek the Fifth, and this is where the chucking-out begins!"

"Hands off, you bounders, or we'll—"

"Out you go!"

The Fifth-Formers, laughing and jeering, made a rush at the three, and the latter were, of course, swept off their feet, and hurled forth from the room in a considerably ruffled condition. They sprawled on the floor in the corridor, and the Fifth-Formers stood crowding in the doorway, laughing loudly.

Tom was the first upon his feet. He had struggled, vainly but heroically, and his collar was torn out, his jacket split down the back, and his waistcoat half buttonless.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the Fifth-Formers. "Got any more challenges to bring, Merry?"

"Wait a bit, you horrid bounders!" gasped Tom. "We'll make you sit up for it yet. Come on, chappies!"

He helped the dazed and dizzy Manners and Monty to their feet; and the three, looking decidedly the worse for wear, went down the passage, followed by the derisive laughter and hooting of the Fifth Form.

"Never mind," said Tom, when they reached their study. "That's only the preliminary canter. Devigne won't find it such a beastly funny laughing matter soon."

His chums looked at themselves ruefully in the glass. "I dare say you're right, Tom," said Manners, with a grimace. "But, so far, I must confess that Devigne and his lot have the grin of us."

"It looks to me like that," agreed Monty Lowther. "No more giddy ambassadorial functions for me. We'll give the Fifth Form room a wide berth."

"We'll make the Fifth Form sit up," said Tom determinedly. "Anybody got any money?"

"What do you want money for?"

"To carry out an idea. Don't ask questions, but hand over all the tin you've got."

Manners turned out three shillings, Monty Lowther seven-and-sixpence. Tom searched through his pocket and found a pound note and nearly a pound in odd silver. Tom Merry generally had plenty of pocket-money.

"That will do, I reckon," he said reflectively. "Now I'm off!"

"Where are you going?"

"To High Clavering!" said Tom, putting on his cap as he turned to the door. He had made his appearance a little more respectable.

"What are you going to do in the village?"

"No time to stop now, or the shop will be closed! Ta-ta!" And Tom Merry hurried off, leaving his friends considerably mystified.

"What the dickens is the silly chap up to?" exclaimed Manners. "What's he going to do?"

Monty Lowther made an expressive grimace. "He's going to blow our tin!" he replied. "We can be sure of that; and, as for the rest, I suppose he'll tell us when he comes back. Hallo! There's Devigne!"

The captain of the Upper Fifth looked into the study as he passed. He had his hat on, as if he were just going out.

"Hallo!" he said. "Got any more challenges to give away?"

"Oh, go and eat pancakes!" said Manners. And Devigne grinned and passed on.

CHAPTER 4.

An Old Acquaintance!

TOM MERRY was none too soon in passing out of the gates of Clavering. It was dusk, and close upon locking-up time. It was extremely probable that Tom would not be back in time for call-over, but he had to risk that.

He went down the road towards the village at a brisk pace. He was soon out of sight of the school, in a part of the road where huge pine-trees shadowed it on either side. Even in the daytime this spot was shadowy, and now in the dusk of evening it was very dark.

Tom gave quite a jump as a ragged figure detached itself from a low rail along the lane at this point and stepped into his path.

"Skuse me, young gentleman, can you 'elp a 'ard-workin' man?"

The voice was half wheedling and half threatening. There was a familiar note in it to Tom's ears, and he looked curiously at the man, noting the liquor-reddened face, the bleared eyes, the dirty, unkempt beard.

"Honest Jim!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

Back to his memory had come the day when he had first come to Clavering and had lost his way. He had sought information of a tramp. The latter had obligingly led him into the heart of a wood and tried to rob him there.

The man had called himself Honest Jim, and it was this identical Honest Jim who had now placed himself in the boy's path.

He recognised Tom at the same moment, although the athletic young fellow in Etons was very much changed from the lad who had fallen into his clutches on the previous occasion.

"So it's you, young shaver, is it?"

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"Yes," he said shortly, "it is I. You'd better clear out of this place, my mar, if you don't want the police set on your track!"

Honest John showed his dirty yellow teeth in a snarl. "You'll set 'em on my track, will you?" he said. "You will, will you?"

"Yes, I will, if you don't clear out, you hulking brute!" exclaimed Tom. "Let me pass!"

The man came a step closer to him.

"You got away from me before," he said. "You won't find it so easy this time, young shaver! And over your watch and your tin now—quick!"

Tom Merry sprang back. He had no intention whatever of allowing the ruffian to rob him; but he saw that Honest Jim was ready for any deed of violence, and he knew that he was in a tight place.

The ruffian, with a muttered curse, rushed straight at him, whirling aloft his cudgel. A desperate look came into Tom's eyes. There was no escaping the attack; he had one chance and he took it. Lowering his head, he rushed to meet the ruffian, and in a flash they met, with a stunning shock.

Tom could not have escaped the slash of the cudgel, but by his prompt action he had taken the ruffian quite by surprise. Honest Jim's arm descended, but the cudgel was past Tom, and only his elbow came with a clump on the back of Tom's neck. And Tom's head went like a battering-ram at the ruffian's chest.

Honest Jim was bowled over like a ninepin. Down into the road he went with a crash, and his cudgel flew from his hand into the grass. Tom reeled back, sick and faint with the concussion. The ruffian, cursing savagely, was scrambling up.

Tom turned to fly, dazed and dizzy, and ran back the way he had come. He heard the ruffian's steps pounding behind him and ran his hardest, but the shock had unsteadied him, and he was not in his best form. He burst out of the shadow of the trees into the more open road where the twilight was yet clear. There was a sudden, sharp exclamation.

"Where are you running to?"

Tom gasped with relief when he recognised Devigne. "There's a brute of a tramp after me!" he panted. "Stand by me, Devigne! There he is!"

Honest Jim came running up.

Devigne clenched his fists and faced him; and the ruffian, seeing that he had two foes to tackle, paused irresolutely.

"Hallo!" said the Fifth-Former. "What do you want, my man?"

The ruffian gave him a sullen look.

"I want that young 'ound!" he said between his teeth. "I'll find a time yet!"

Devigne looked at him curiously.

"You'd better get back to the school, Merry," he said abruptly.

"I'm going to the village," Tom replied.

"Cut off back to school!" said Devigne harshly. "You've no right to be out. Get back to Clavering at once, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Rats!"

Devigne's eyes blazed.

"You impertinent young rascal! Are you going back or not?"

"No, I'm not. I've as much right to stay out as you have, if it comes to that! You're not a prefect!" said Tom, with spirit.

The Fifth-Former looked for a moment as if he would spring upon him. But he restrained himself, giving the junior a very dark look.

"Very well," he said, between his teeth—"very well! I'll remember that, Merry!"

Tom made a gesture of indifference, and, keeping a wary eye upon Honest Jim, passed the latter and hurried on towards the village. The tramp scowled at him, but made no motion to molest him again.

Honest Jim had been watching Devigne curiously. Now Tom had gone, the captain of the Upper Fifth fixed his eyes upon the tramp with a peculiar expression.

"You can keep your distance!" he said, as Honest Jim made a movement to approach him. "It seems that you have met that boy before to-day?"

"Yes, I have!" growled the ruffian. "And I'll meet him again yet!"

"What do you hate him for?"

"Because I do!" snarled Honest Jim. "Ain't that enough, mister? I fancy you don't love him any too much yourself!"

Devigne laughed slightly.

"I suppose you found me very much in your way just now?" he remarked. "It stopped your little game, which, I suppose, was robbery with violence? I am half sorry that I came along. You are right in thinking that I don't like the fellow. Suppose—"

He paused and looked long and very earnestly into the rugged, brutal face of the tramp.

Honest Jim nodded intelligently.

"Give me a chance," he said, "and I'll do for you what you'd like to do, but daren't. Yes, I know what you are thinking of."

Devigne changed colour slightly.

"He may be in my way," he said slowly, and in a low

voice. "Mind, he is not now, but he may be, and if that comes about—never mind now. Can I see you again if I want to? Are you staying round here?"

"Yes, mister. If you come to the old barn in the Green Acres, you'll find me most any night. That there's my hotel just at present." And the ruffian grinned.

Devigne nodded.

"I'll remember. I may want to see you again. I don't know. There's half-a-crown for you, anyway."

He tossed the coin to the tramp, and Honest Jim's grimy paw closed upon it.

"I'll remember, mister."

Devigne strode towards the village. He had started out to order a new cricket-bat there, but he was not now thinking of that.

From the expression on his face his thoughts did not appear to be pleasant or charitable ones. Devigne was a fellow who was passably well liked in his Form, but it was well known that he was spiteful and unforgiving and a bad enemy to have. There was much of latent evil in his nature which circumstances might easily develop. And it looked very much as if it were being developed now by his dislike and jealousy to Tom Merry.

He entered the village, and the object of his visit there, recurring to his mind, he went into the shop which supplied Clavering with most of its athletic goods. Somewhat to his surprise, he found Tom Merry there. He had expected Tom to be bound for the tuckshop. Tom nodded to him cheerfully, and Devigne scowled.

"What are you doing here, Merry?"

"Buying things," said Tom. "Nice assortment, ain't it?"

Devigne looked in amazement at the pile of Tom's purchases on the counter. They were chiefly, it seemed, musical instruments—tin whistles and mouth-organs, a small kettle-drum and sticks, and a cheap concertina, and half a dozen sets of castanets.

"I think that's about all, Mr. Goode," said Tom. "You won't forget to send them up to the school in the morning?"

"Certainly not, Master Merry!" said Mr. Goode, who was lost in wonder as much as Devigne; but very pleased, nevertheless, to find so excellent a customer. "You shall have them by the first delivery of goods in the morning."

"And you'll return half the purchase-money on all goods brought back undamaged?"

"That's the agreement, sir."

"Well, there's the tin," said Tom.

The proprietor of the shop counted out the change.

"What the dickens do you want with all those things, Merry?" demanded the mystified Devigne. "Have you gone right off your rocker?"

"Not quite," said Tom Merry pleasantly. "You'll learn if you live long enough, Devigne, and I dare say you will, as it will be in full swing to-morrow."

"What will be in full swing?"

"You'll see to-morrow. Good-night, Mr. Goode!"

And Tom sauntered out of the shop. He returned to the school by a different route, to keep out of the way of Honest Jim, and did not encounter the tramp. But he found the school gates closed, and when he was admitted he had to encounter Herr Schneider. And the German master gave him three on each hand for being late for call-over, and when Tom went to his study his hands were tucked away under his arms, and he was making a very wry face. Still, he seemed to be in a satisfied mood.

CHAPTER 5.

Facing the Music!

"HALLO, what on earth's that?"

"Sounds like a German band."

"It can't be."

"What on earth is it?"

"What a thundering row!"

These exclamations, and a great many more of the same kind, might have been heard—and, as a matter of fact, were heard—in the Fifth Form room at Clavering College, after school the following day.

There were a goodly number of Fifth-Formers in the room, some of them playing chess or draughts, some of them chatting, some oiling their cricket bats, or otherwise occupied.

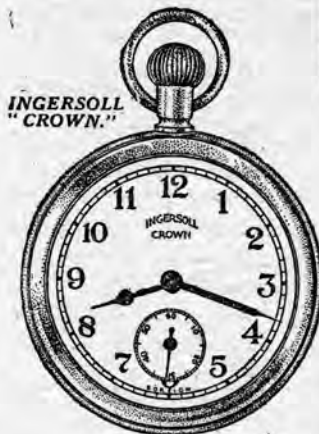
From the quadrangle had come a sudden blare of noise.

The windows of the Fifth Form room overlooked the quad, and in the pleasant summer evening they were open, so the Fifth-Formers had the full benefit of the terrific disturbance that had just broken out.

And a terrific disturbance it truly was. The sounds of many musical instruments were blended together, dominated by the aggressive rattle of a kettledrum, and, as Cary suggested, it sounded like a band, with all the performers in an advanced state of intoxication.

(Continued on the next page.)

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There was a rush of the Fifth-Formers to the window to see what on earth was the matter. Then new exclamations of amazement went forth.

The sight in the Close was astounding. Under the windows a band was gathered, composed of boys out of the Shell. Monty Lowther, Manners, Jimson, French, and Harris, and a good many more, were there as large as life, armed with various instruments, and all playing away furiously. Tom Merry, with a cricket stump in his hand, by way of baton, was conducting.

Tom was grinning hugely, and some of the performers were grinning, too, so much so that they found difficulty in producing music.

The cricket stump waved rhythmically, somewhat to the danger of bystanders when they came too close.

"Louder!" exclaimed the conductor. "Faster! You're not making noise enough! The Upper Fifth will never hear you!"

"They must be as deaf as adders, then!" giggled Monty Lowther.

"Don't talk; keep on with the music!"

"The music! Oh, my only Panama hat!"

"Shut up! Get on, I tell you!"

And the conductor gave the recalcitrant Monty a dig in the ribs with the pointed end of the stump, which made him gasp.

Devigne leaned out of the window above, his sour face dark with anger.

"What does this mean?" he bawled. "What are you up to, Merry? How dare you come and make that thundering row under our window!"

"Keep it up, chaps! Louder!"

Manners rattled away on the kettledrum for all he was worth. Mouth-organs, tin whistles, castanets, and cymbals—the latter consisting mainly of saucepan lids—backed him up, and the din was positively terrific.

"Tom Merry!" yelled Devigne.

Tom turned his head.

"Hallo! Did you speak?"

"What are you making that noise for?" howled the Fifth-Former.

"What noise?"

"That thundering row!"

"Oh, this isn't a noise or a row, it's music!"

"If you don't clear off at once, we'll come out to you!"

"Don't you like music?" asked Tom innocently.

Devigne raved.

The fearful noise was ear-splitting, and it could be heard all over Clavering. Fellows were coming from all parts to see what was the matter, and windows were opening everywhere. Many of the onlookers stuffed their fingers into their ears.

"He's gone mad!" gasped Cary. "That's what it is. He's mad!"

"What is the game, anyway, Merry?" bawled Saunders.

Tom looked up at the window again.

"We've got an announcement to make," he replied. "We want all Clavering to hear it, and this is the most striking way I could think of to gather 'em round."

"What do you want to do it under our blessed window for?"

"Why, it concerns you, you know."

"Get away!" roared Devigne, as the music burst out more ferociously than ever. "We'll come out to you, Merry, and wipe up the ground with you!"

Tom took no notice.

The band blazed forth furiously, and Devigne hurried to the door of the Fifth Form room.

"Come on, chaps!" he exclaimed. "Let's go out and smash the brutes, and trample on their beastly instruments of torture! I'll make Manners eat his drumsticks, and shove a mouth-organ down Tom Merry's throat!"

The Fifth crowded after him.

Devigne dragged at the door, but it would not open.

"Hallo, what's the matter with this beastly door?" he exclaimed. "It won't open! Who's locked it?"

"It isn't locked," said Cary. "Why, there's the key in the lock!"

"Well, it won't open, then!"

"Let me try."

"I tell you it won't open!" snapped Devigne.

Cary tried, and pulled with all his might; but the door refused to budge. It gave about half an inch, and then remained immovable.

The truth dawned upon the imprisoned Fifth-Formers all at once.

"Tom Merry's fastened it!"

Devigne gritted his teeth. It was evidently true. Tom Merry had contrived to fasten the door on the outside before the band started under the window. A rope tied across

from the handle to the handle of a door opposite had probably done it.

"We're giddy prisoners!" exclaimed Saunders, who seemed inclined to take the affair humorously. "There's no getting out of this."

Devigne hurried back to the window.

The band was still in full blast, and the noise was simply deafening.

"Hallo!" said Tom, as Devigne's head was put out again. "Coming to face the music? You'll get to like it in the long run!"

"I'll break your neck for you! Go and unfasten our door!"

"Oh, you've discovered that, have you? No, we can't do it. You'd very likely come and bother us, and put us off our time."

"Shut up that ghastly row, you set of silly lunatics!"

Tom Merry glanced round. Almost all Clavering had crowded to the spot—seniors and juniors—and Tom thought it time to get down to business before a master came upon the scene with a cane. He held up his baton.

"Halt!" he exclaimed. "I mean, take a rest. This is where the speechifying begins."

The band clattered and squeaked into silence.

"Take notice!" bawled Tom Merry. "Clavering chaps, and all whom it may concern, that the Shell have challenged the Upper Fifth to a cricket match, and that the Upper Fifth are afraid to come up to scratch!"

There was a yell of rage from the Fifth Form window, and a shout of laughter in the Close.

"Oh yez, oh yez, oh yez!" bawled Tom. "Take notice, everybody! The Upper Fifth have funk'd meeting the Shell on the cricket field, and they can't play the game for toffee. Oh yez, oh yez, oh yez!"

Devigne was gasping with rage. He swarmed out of the window, and, at the risk of a bump, dropped down to the ground. He wanted to get to close quarters with Tom Merry without delay.

He dropped on his feet but fell over, and the Shell did not give him a chance to get up again. Jimson and Harris sat upon him and pinned him down, and Manners gave him a playful tap on the nose with a drumstick.

"Let me get up!" roared Devigne.

"Rats!" said Tom. "You look very pretty where you are. Give him another tap if he wriggles, Manners. Teach him manners!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Devigne was struggling furiously, and the drumstick beat a tattoo upon his features, which drove him into a state bordering on frenzy. The crowd watching this peculiar scene were in a state of hysteria from laughing.

Some Fifth-Formers who happened to be in the Close came up to the rescue, but the Shell closed up to meet them, and they were in greater force.

"Rescue! Help!" spluttered Devigne.

But the Upper Fifth were following him now from the window. They came dropping down, and they lost no time in coming to fisticuffs with the Shell. Devigne was released from his uncomfortable position, and he rushed at Tom Merry. In a moment they were locked in a deadly embrace.

Alas! for the band, and for the cash that was to be returned to Tom Merry for all the musical instruments taken back undamaged.

In the wild scramble that ensued the instruments went to the ground, and were trampled underfoot by the combatants. They were flattened into all sorts of shapes, and the kettledrum was stamped out of all semblance to one. The drumsticks, however, in the hands of Manners, still did some execution.

The uproar was at its height when Felgate came hurrying upon the scene.

"What's all this fearful row?" cried the captain of Clavering. "Stop it, you lunatics! Mr. Railton is coming!"

The name of the Head of Clavering was enough to make the combatants desist—all but Devigne and Tom Merry. They were tightly gripped, and, reeling to and fro, knocking aside everybody that came in their way. Felgate made sign to South of the Sixth, and the two big seniors gripped the rivals and, with a tremendous jerk, tore them apart.

"Lem-lem-lemme get my breath!" gasped Tom. "It's all right. We were only making an announcement to the school, when Devigne had to interfere."

"Let me get at him!" roared Devigne.

"Keep that ass quiet, South!" said Felgate.

"Right-ho!" said the Sixth-Former; and he held Devigne fast, in spite of his struggling. "Shut up, Devigne, you ass! I'm not going to let you go!"

Tom Merry quickly recovered his coolness, and he smiled sweetly at his enemy.

"Keep your wool on, Devigne!" he exclaimed, in his

genial way. "I know it's a bit of a rotten come-down to have to own up before all Clavering that you're afraid of a junior Form, but the truth is the giddy truth, you know."

Felgate gave Tom a shake.

"What are you talking about, Merry?"

"Why, we challenged the Upper Fifth to a cricket match, Felgate, and they funk it, so we're showing them up—that's all."

"It's a lie!" yelled Saunders. "We don't funk it!"

"We're not going to play with a lot of kids!" cried Cary.

"No; you're afraid of getting licked!" howled the Shell, with one voice.

The uproar was starting again, but Felgate shouted for silence.

"Well, you shouldn't have made such a ghastly row, Merry," he said. "All the same, it's not sportsmanlike to refuse a challenge!"

funking any matches lately, till they were quite wild on the subject, and it was dangerous to mention it.

A feeling was growing in the Upper Fifth that the challenge should be accepted, if only to put an end to the jeering and joking of the other Forms. Some of the fellows consulted together, and put it plainly to Devigne; but the captain of the Form Eleven shook his head.

"We can't play a set of kids!" he said decisively. "It's infra dig. We can't do it. Of course, we should lick them easily. It would be simply a walk over for us; but what a set of silly guys we should look, playing a lot of boys!"

"They're not bad cricketers," said Saunders; "and Felgate is talking about putting Merry into the First Eleven."

Devigne scowled blackly. That was a sore subject with him.

"I can't help it if Felgate's a silly ass!" he said.

"Well, Felgate knows a lot more about cricket than you do, anyway!"



Crack! Tom opened his shoulders to a full toss and the ball sailed straight for Herr Schneider. It landed on his Panama hat and turned it into a passable likeness to a concertina.

"We're not going to play a lot of kids out of a lower Form!"

"Yah! Afraid!" howled the Shell.

"Hallo! Here's the Head!"

The athletic form of Mr. Railton, the young Head of Clavering, was approaching with rapid strides. There was a general exodus at the sight of him.

When Mr. Railton reached the spot he found only the non-combatants there, and the field of battle strewn with trampled musical instruments.

The Shell were gone, in various directions. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther foregathered in the study. Tom's face showed very visible signs of his encounter with Devigne, but he was as cheerful and as merry as ever.

"We've let all Clavering know how the case stands," he grinned. "There's nothing else likely to be talked about for some time, I fancy. If the Upper Fifth don't meet us on the cricket field now they'll be the joke of the school."

CHAPTER 6.

The Shell on the Warpath.

CLAVERING, as a matter of fact, was convulsed by Tom Merry's latest device, and all the Forms except the Upper Fifth chuckled over it again and again. Devigne and his Form, however, took it very badly.

Fellows made anxious inquiries of them whether they were going to meet the Shell eleven, and whether they had been

"Bah! He has to do something for Tom Merry, of course!"

"What do you mean? I don't see why he has to."

"Merry could have got in as captain at the election, if he had liked. He stood out, and let Felgate get in. What did he do it for?"

"Blessed if I know! What are you getting at?"

"Well, Felgate's talking about playing him in the First Eleven now."

Saunders whistled.

"Hang it all, Devigne, do you mean that Felgate would put him in if he wasn't First Eleven form, to make it up to him for standing out of the election?"

Devigne bit his lip. He felt that he had allowed his passion to carry him too far, but he could not retract his insinuation.

"I don't say so," he exclaimed; "but a chap can't help putting two and two together. Is it common sense to take a fellow from the Shell for the First Eleven, when there's better batsmen in the Upper Fifth?"

"No, that's true enough; but I can't believe that Felgate—"

"I don't say anything for certain," said Devigne hastily. "Let it drop. I only say that Tom Merry is not the player one might think from his name being mentioned for the

First, that's all. And the rest of that team are simply kids. We can't play the Shell. We're not going to play them."

"The fellows will say we're afraid of getting licked."

"They're already saying it," said another.

"Let them say what they like," said Devigne impatiently. "This is only a freak of Tom Merry's, and we're not going to rise to the bait. It'll blow over as soon as that youngster starts some fresh trick."

"They seem to me to be in deadly earnest. They mean to force us to play, or show us up to all Clavering as a set of funks!" growled Saunders.

"Well, they're not going to force us to play."

The remonstrators withdrew, in no good humour at Devigne's obstinacy, and the captain of the Upper Fifth was left alone in his study with Cary. Cary looked at him curiously when the door closed.

"I say, Devigne, this is getting serious. It looks to me as if we shall have to play the Shell, whether we like it or not."

"Not so long as I'm captain!" snapped the other.

Cary gave an expressive whistle.

"It may mean mutiny in the Form!"

"Do you mean that they may throw me over and get another captain to meet the Shell?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"I don't think it's likely. They wouldn't have much chance without me in their ranks."

"No, that's true; but I'm beginning to think that even with you, Edgar, we shouldn't have much chance."

"What do you mean?" growled Devigne uneasily.

"Now we're quite by ourselves, we may as well be frank about it," said Cary, with a grin. "The Upper Fifth eleven can't play the Shell. They would lick us."

"What rot! A set of kids!"

"Keep that for the others," grinned Cary. "Better talk plain English with me, Devigne. I'm with you through thick and thin, as you know. Tom Merry is simply a wonder with the bat, and if we meet the Shell in a fair match he would win it for them. He would knock up twice as many runs as you could, Devigne, to be quite frank."

"I don't believe it for a moment."

"I do, then. If he scored more than you, Felgate couldn't have a single doubt left as to which of you to put into Clavering First."

Devigne's face was very dark, but his expression showed that he felt the truth of the words uttered by his chum. His talk about dignity of the Form was mainly humbug. It was a defeat he was afraid of.

"They could lick us," said Cary, in his brutally candid way; "and as we're not going to be licked by a lower Form, we shall have to talk big about our dignity, and refuse to meet them. Better have it out plain between ourselves."

"Well, suppose I admit it," growled Devigne, "that brute Merry has got us in a cleft stick. He's going to drive us into accepting his challenge, if he can. Then, if we win, there's no glory in beating a Form so much lower than our own; while, if we lose, we couldn't hold up our heads again. He wins all along the line."

"Yes; and if he beats us he gets into Clavering First."

"Confound it, yes! What do you keep harping on that for?" Devigne gritted his teeth spitefully. "I suppose it's pretty certain that Felgate will put him in the First Eleven if he beats us. But even supposing we are driven to play the Shell, Tom Merry may not be in his usual form for batting."

Cary laughed.

"I suppose you're not thinking of damaging him and putting him off his form?"

"Who said I was?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, the thought crossed my mind," said Cary. "Suppose you accepted his challenge, and then picked a quarrel with him, and gave him a thundering good hiding the day before the match? He wouldn't bat very well with an ache in every bone of his body, and we should walk over them easily."

"Jolly good idea, only the whole school would know what I had pitched into him for," growled Devigne. "If you can't think of a better idea than that you'd better give it up."

"Have you got a better one?"

"Never mind. I shan't play the Shell, if I can help it. If I'm forced to, Tom Merry shan't be fit to play much of a game against us. That's all I've got to say."

And, in spite of Cary's efforts to draw him further, Devigne refused to say a word more about his secret intentions.

That the Upper Fifth would be forced to play the test match was becoming very probable. For Tom Merry, having drawn the attention of all Clavering to the dispute,

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and to the fact that the Upper Fifth were funky, was not inclined to let it rest.

The morning after the adventure of the band in the Close, the Upper Fifth, on coming out of their class-room, found a giggling crowd collected before the notice-board in the Hall. Naturally they wanted to know what was the matter, and they came crowding up curiously. Their curiosity changed to rage as they saw what it was that had gathered the gigglers in front of the notice-board.

Among the various notices pinned there was a black-edged card, got up very neatly in the deepest mourning style. It was inscribed as follows:

**"In Affectionate Remembrance of the
Upper Fifth Form at Clavering.
Which died of Fright on being Challenged
To meet the Middle School
on the Cricket Field. R.I.P."**

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the readers of this precious mourning card, and the Hall rang with their laughter.

"Hallo!" cried Jimson. "Here are some of the corpses!"

"Died of fright!" sobbed Monty Lowther, taking out his handkerchief. "The poor little things couldn't stand the shock. Boo-oo-oo!"

Devigne stalked off in a rage.

All Clavering giggled over the mourning card, till it was torn down by an angry Upper Fifth-Former and rent into little pieces.

But that did not do much good, for after afternoon school there was another notice on the board in the handwriting of Tom Merry. A furious crowd of Fifth-Formers read it.

And this was the notice:

**"Take notice, all whom it may concern!
The Upper Fifth Form
having given up Cricket
are taking to playing marbles instead."**

**The Fifth Form ground
is to BE LET, as it will not be wanted any more.
Anyone willing to take bats, balls, stumps and nets
in exchange for TOPS AND MARBLES,
should apply at The Fifth Form order.**

BY ORDER."

The Fifth-Formers looked at each other sheepishly.

Fellows of the Sixth were laughing themselves giddy over it, and the Fourth Form howled till the Hall rang again.

Some of the masters who came that way read the notice and exploded over it, and even Herr Schneider cackled till he was red in the face.

Naturally, Mr. Railton was not long in hearing of it. Mr. Welch, the master of the Shell, had told him about the mourning card, and when he heard that there was a fresh notice on the board, Mr. Railton came along to look at it.

The boys fell back respectfully at sight of the Head, but they could not stop laughing, in spite of his presence. Mr. Railton stopped before the notice-board and read Tom Merry's precious effusion, and tried to frown. But he could not. The frown relaxed, and a smile took its place. The smile broadened to a laugh, and the laugh to a roar.

And the boys, encouraged at seeing the Head laugh, joined in with gusto, and again the Hall rang with merriment.

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Railton at last, with the tears running down his cheeks. "This is most ridiculous and absurd. What does it mean?"

Tom Merry was there, and Mr. Railton had fixed his eyes upon him, easily guessing who had written that precious notice, even if he had not known Tom's writing.

The hero of the Shell looked very demure.

"I believe that was written by a fellow in our Form, sir," he said, as the Head was looking straight at him and evidently expecting him to reply.

"Indeed! I dare say you have reason to believe that, Merry," said Mr. Railton dryly.

"Yes, sir, I have reason to believe it."

"And what is the cause of this absurd prank?"

"I think the Shell have challenged the Upper Fifth to a cricket match, sir."

"And have the Upper Fifth refused to meet them?"

"I heard so, sir. You see, sir, we licked the Lower Fifth, and we want to give the Upper Fifth a turn, so as to be fair all round. But Devigne and his lot are not taking any—I mean, they have declined the challenge."

"Ah, I see, Merry! I am afraid I cannot allow such

a notice as this to remain on the board," said Mr. Railton, taking it down. "Felgate, I should like to speak to you in my study, if you will kindly follow me there."

"Certainly, sir!"

And the captain of Clavering accompanied the Head to his study.

"Well, I think it's working," exclaimed Tom. "If the Upper Fifth won't meet us kids we'll make their giddy existence a burden, and no mistake!"

And, indeed, that prediction seemed likely to be realised; for a little later some of the challenged Form found a box of coloured tops and a bag of marbles in their room, with a note appended: "A present from the Fourth Form."

Devigne hurled the bag of marbles against the wall in a rage, and it burst and sent the contents all over the room, with a clatter.

"This is getting sickening!" exclaimed Saunders wrathfully. "Look here, Devigne, how long do you think this is going to last?"

"How the dickens should I know?" growled Edgar Devigne.

"We shall get chipped to death. I think we ought to meet the Shell."

"Who's captain of this Form, Saunders?"

"You are, I suppose—or were. You're not much of a captain now, letting us get chipped like this by a set of youngsters!"

"We're not going to play a junior Form!"

"Better that than we should be set down for a lot of funks. Look here, if you don't play the game, Devigne, I shall see what the fellows say to playing it without you!"

"You can do as you like, if you think you could beat the Shell without my assistance."

"Do you mean that you wouldn't play in the team?"

"I certainly wouldn't!"

And Devigne thrust his hands into his pockets and walked away. He went to his room for his cricket bat, with the intention of going down to the Fifth Form ground to practise. A general shout of inquiry greeted him in the Close.

"Hallo, Devigne! What are you going to do with that bat?"

"You don't play cricket!"

"What you want is a humming-top!"

Devigne gritted his teeth as he walked on, pretending not to hear. It began to be borne in upon his mind that he would have to play the Shell.

CHAPTER 7.

The Challenge Accepted.

MR. RAILTON at that very time was talking the matter over very seriously with Felgate. Mr. Railton was a splendid athlete and an Old Blue, and he took the deepest interest in the athletic side of life at Clavering. He was almost as keen as Felgate to see the college beat the record in the summer fixtures.

"What is all this about the Shell and the Upper Fifth, Felgate?" he said. "There seems to have been a quarrel of some kind. What does it all mean?"

The captain of Clavering smiled ruefully.

"Young Merry is at the bottom of it, of course," he said. "Of course, you would guess that, Mr. Railton."

The Head smiled, too.

"Yes, I have learned to think of Merry at once when there is a departure from the normal in anything," he replied. "He is on the warpath against the Upper Fifth, it seems."

"Yes. It began with the usual match the other day between the Shell and the Lower Fifth. In the ordinary course of events the Lower Fifth would have beaten the Shell, as a lower Form. Owing to Merry's remarkable batting the Shell won the match, beating the Lower Fifth hollow, with three wickets to spare."

"Yes, I heard about that, and I am sorry I did not see the match."

"Then the Shell challenged the Upper Fifth."

"Like Alexander, they sought fresh worlds to conquer," smiled the Head.

"Yes, sir, that's about it," said Felgate, laughing. "Of course, such a challenge would in ordinary circumstances have been awful cheek in a Form so much lower in the school, but the circumstances are exceptional. The Shell have beaten the Lower Fifth easily. They naturally think they have a good chance against the next Form higher, and I must say that I think so, too. Devigne and his men are angry at being challenged—I can understand that, too—but I can't help thinking that fear of defeat has as much to do with it as offended dignity."

The Head nodded slowly.

"Such a match would do no harm," he remarked, "if it

were undertaken in a friendly spirit. But Devigne appears to have definitely refused."

"Yes; and ever since the Shell have been chipping the Upper Fifth about funking the match. It is evidently Merry's intention to drive Devigne into meeting him."

"Of course, he could be stopped."

The captain of Clavering looked doubtful.

"I don't quite see how, sir," he replied. "He could be stopped putting notices on the board, certainly, and playing a band in the Close. But he would find some other means a master could not take exception to. Besides, the whole school's taken it up now. The Fourth Form have entered into it as the joke of the season. Tom Merry has a big following among the juniors."

"I'm not surprised at that," said the Head. "I really want your advice on this matter, Felgate. The present state of affairs is far from satisfactory. You think that Devigne should accept the challenge?"

"I think that would clear the air a bit, sir. And here is another reason why the two Forms should meet."

"What is the reason?"

"I have been thinking of putting Tom Merry in the First Eleven. His only possible rival outside the Sixth is Devigne, of the Upper Fifth. Devigne would have had the place, for he's a good and reliable bat, but Merry has shown such extremely good form that I am hesitating now."

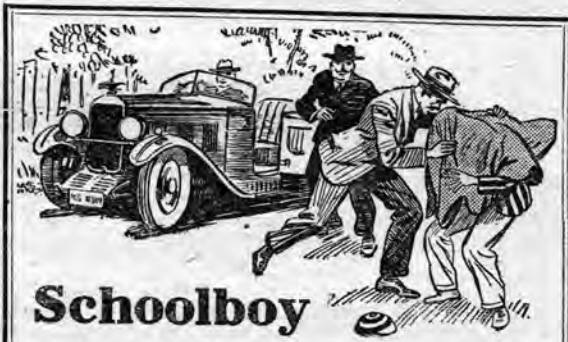
"A match between the Forms would set the matter at rest. You could easily judge, then, which of the two was the more fit to play for the college in the summer fixtures."

"That's what I am thinking, sir."

"You know I never interfere with you in these matters, Felgate," said the Head. "I believe in leaving them to the discretion of the school captain. But I should certainly like, on this occasion, to advise you to exert your authority as captain of the sports, and insist upon the Upper Fifth meeting the Shell on the cricket-field."

"I am glad to hear you say so, sir," said Felgate. "It's what I was thinking myself, but I did not like to act so decidedly on my own initiative. There are two good reasons for playing the match, and none really against it. The dignity of the Upper Fifth is all nonsense. If they can beat the Shell, they'll put Merry and his team in their place; and if they can't—why, their dignity isn't hurt by playing a better eleven than themselves, that's certain."

"Suppose you put it to Devigne like that, Felgate?"



Schoolboy King Kidnapped

A lonely lane; three men in a car; a brief struggle—and the young King Victor of Caronia is kidnapped. Thus begins a series of amazing adventures for Nipper and the cheery chums of St. Frank's. Sinister plotters menace their new Form-fellow, Victor Orlando, the schoolboy king, and valiantly they stand by him. Mystery, adventure, fights, fun, thrills—all are contained in this superb long school-story of St. Frank's entitled "The Kidnapped King" in this week's

NELSON LEE

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"I will do so, sir."

And the captain of Clavering quitted the Head's study with his mind made up. When Edgar Devigne came in from the cricket-field, Felgate was waiting for him.

Devigne came off the ground through a crowd of Shell fellows, who greeted him with derisive grins and remarks. The captain of the Upper Fifth glared at them savagely. He placed himself at his enemy's mercy by his hasty temper, and the jokers were not slow to take advantage of his passionate outbursts.

"Have some marbles, Devigne?" asked Jimson sweetly, as he tossed one at Devigne, catching him on the nose with it.

Devigne rushed at Jimson like a mad bull. But Tom Merry caught him by the shoulders and pulled him back. Devigne gave him a thump on the chest, and he sat down, and the angry Fifth-Former strode away.

An almost hysterical yell of laughter followed him. For Tom, in pulling him off Jimson, had slyly pinned a paper on the back of his shirt, and half Clavering read the following from behind Devigne as he strode away:

**"ARE WE DOWNHEARTED?
RATHER!"**

Devigne looked back in amazement at the yell of laughter that followed him. He saw Tom Merry doubled up, and for a moment imagined that he must have really hurt him by that thump on the chest. But he soon saw that the hero of the Shell was doubled up with mirth. Everybody was shrieking, even fellows of Devigne's own Form. He strode away furiously. He passed Herr Schneider, and the German burst into a guffaw.

"Mein gootness! Ha, ha, ha! Ach! Mein gootness!"

Devigne scowled at him.

"What are all those silly geese cackling at, Felgate?" he asked, as he reached the spot where the captain of Clavering was standing.

"Blessed if I know!" said Felgate, who was as mystified as Devigne, not being able to see the back of him. "What's that they're saying?"

"Are we downhearted?" roared the boys of the Shell.

And an answering roar rang across the Close:

"Rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, there's something on your back!" said Cary, coming up.

"On my back! What the deuce do you mean?"

"Look here!"

Cary detached the paper, and held it up for Devigne and Felgate to see. The captain of Clavering burst into a roar. Devigne's face went as black as night.

"Are we downhearted?" giggled Cary. "Rather! Oh crumbs!"

"Shut up, you silly ass! There's nothing to laugh at!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see anything funny in that!"

"I can! Ha, ha, ha! He, he, he!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Felgate. "Yes, it's funny!"

Devigne tore the paper into fragments. He strode furiously away. Felgate followed him quickly.

"I want to speak to you about this affair, Devigne," he said. "I'll come to your study."

"You can come if you like," said Devigne ungraciously.

The captain of Clavering followed him into his study. Devigne, who suspected that something unpleasant was coming, turned and looked at him with a sour expression.

"It's about the challenge from the Shell, Devigne," said Felgate quietly. "Merry and his Form have challenged you to a cricket match."

"Yes, like the cheeky young rascals they are."

"Well, I think you ought to meet them."

Devigne gave a bitter sneer.

"Would you meet them if they challenged the Sixth?" he asked.

"If they could put into the field anything like a team fit to meet the Sixth, I would meet them—yes, I'd do it willingly. But, of course, they can't; it's not in the nature of things."

"And it is in the nature of things, I suppose, for them to be able to meet the next Form below the Sixth," said Devigne sarcastically.

"No, not exactly; but as they've licked the Lower Fifth, there's no reason why they should not have a chance against the Upper."

"It would be a ridiculous match!"

"To speak plainly, Devigne, I believe the Shell have quite as good a chance as you have."

Devigne shrugged his shoulders.

"You're welcome to your opinion, Felgate. It isn't mine."

"I want you to meet them. I want to compare your form with Merry, to make up my mind about selecting one of you for playing in Clavering First."

"I'm sorry, Felgate, but I can't recede from the position I've taken up."

Felgate's eyes flashed.

"You seem to forget that I am captain of Clavering, and that you are under my orders in all matters connected with sports!" he exclaimed.

Devigne scowled.

"However, I won't go into that now," said Felgate. "I've only this to say at present—I believe all this talk about the dignity of a senior Form is all gas, and that if you don't meet the Shell it will be because you're afraid of getting licked. That's plain English!"

Edgar Devigne turned scarlet.

"Then I shall know how to act," resumed the captain of Clavering. "If you dare not meet the Shell, it's because you're not up to Tom Merry's form, and I shall know which of you to choose for Clavering First Eleven."

"You mean that if I don't meet Merry in this match, I shall be definitely passed over for the First team?" said Devigne, biting his lips with rage.

"Yes!" rapped out Felgate. "I mean exactly that."

There was a sudden roar from under the study window.

"Are we downhearted?"

Back came the answering yell.

"Rather!"

Devigne's eyes blazed, and Felgate smiled grimly.

"You see how it is," he remarked. "They'll give you no peace till you meet them on the cricket-field. As a matter of plain truth, Devigne, you've brought this on yourself by your cocky manner towards the Shell. Now you've got Tom Merry's back up, he's fairly on the warpath, and you've simply got to meet him, or be chipped to death."

"We'll meet him, then," said Devigne sullenly. "It's only a question of the dignity of the Form. Of course, we shall win—hands down."

"If you do, and if you make a better show than Merry, you will have your cap for Clavering First, I promise you that," said Felgate. "Now you've made up your mind, I'll put a notice on the board, and perhaps the Shell will let us have a little quiet."

And the captain quitted the room, leaving Devigne a prey to a cold, silent rage, far more dangerous to the boy he hated than any passionate outburst of temper.

"Yes, then I'll meet them," said Devigne, between his set teeth, when he was alone. "I'll meet them; but Tom

Would You Believe It?

On an express run the fireman shovels about a ton of coal an hour to keep up steam.



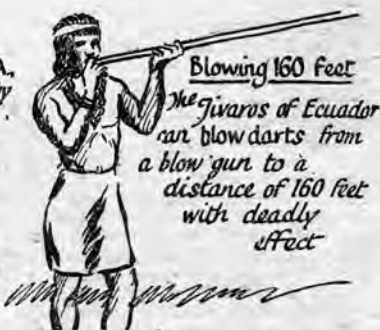
A Charmed Life!

Johanne, the Snake Park attendant at Port Elizabeth, S.A., has been frequently bitten by snakes. He is seen here in the grip of a python & surrounded by other snakes.



Blowing 160 Feet

The Jivaro of Ecuador can blow darts from a blow gun to a distance of 160 feet with deadly effect.



Merry will not be able to knock up many runs for the Shell, if he is able to play at all."

And there was a deadly light in Devigne's eyes that would have startled Felgate had he been still there to see it. But the Clavering captain was down in the Hall, pinning a pencilled note upon the board:

"The Upper Fifth will meet the Shell in a cricket match on Saturday.—G. Felgate."

The news was not long in spreading. Gore came into the study of the chums with it. They were at tea.

"You've got your wish at last!" sneered Gore. "Now you're going to get the licking you have been asking for."

"What do you mean, ass?" asked Manners politely.

"There's a notice on the board—"

Before he could finish, he was bundled aside by a rush of the chums to get out of the study to ascertain whether the news was true. Tom was the first to reach it, and he found a crowd there. He read Felgate's notice.

"It's true!" he exclaimed. "Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" echoed Manners and Monty Lowther. "Are we downhearted?"

"No!"

"Then you will be on Saturday," said Cary. And he went off to find Devigne to make sure that it was correct. Devigne was putting his hat on.

"Hallo, going out?" asked Cary, looking at him.

"Yes!" said Devigne shortly.

"Wait a minute till I get my cap, and I'll come, too."

"Sorry, it's private business, or I'd be glad to have you," said Devigne. "I shall be back by calling-over, I expect."

"There's a notice on the board in Felgate's writing. Is it authorised?"

"How the dickens should I know, when I haven't seen it?"

"You know what I mean. Felgate says we are going to play the Shell on Saturday. Is it true? Have you agreed?"

"Yes. Now, so-long! I must be off."

And Devigne hurried away, leaving his friend in a state of considerable surprise. Not even to Cary, who shared most of his secrets, did Devigne intend to confide his present mission, or the scheme that was working in his brain to defeat Tom Merry. He did not intend a soul at Clavering, friend or foe, to know that he was going out to meet Honest Jim, the tramp and ruffian, in the old barn near the school.

CHAPTER 8.

A Dastardly Compact!

"HALLO, there!"

The dusk of evening was on the fields, and on the old half-ruined barn lying in the shadow of the trees. A man sleeping in a pile of foul straw raised his head at the sound of a step, awakened by the sound, slight as it was. He peered through the gloom at the dim figure that stood in the aperture where the door once had been.

Edgar Devigne started at the sound of the growling voice from the darkness within. For a moment his heart misgave him. He wished he had not come there to see the brutal tramp in his den. But it was only for a moment. Then, with a firm step, he had advanced into the barn.

"Honest Jim!"

There was a chuckle.

"That's me. So it is you, young gentleman?"

"Yes. I have come, you see."

Honest Jim rose from his couch of dirty straw, and rubbed

his bleared eyes. He came into view in the glimmering twilight at the door.

"Here I am, young gentleman! You've come at the right time."

"I'm glad to find you here," said Devigne. "I was afraid that perhaps I should miss you, and have to come again to-morrow night. That would have been awkward. However, here you are. You remember what I said to you the other day?"

"I ain't likely to forget."

"Are you still of the same mind—with regard to the boy Merry, I mean?"

The ruffian ground his yellow teeth.

"Try me and see, young gentleman!"

"Now, listen to me," said Devigne, in a low voice. "I told you that Tom Merry might be in my way. Well, he is now. I want you to do what you promised you would if I helped you. I'm willing to pay for it, too, if you do exactly as I wish; but not otherwise."

"That depends on what you wish, sir."

The tramp's manner became instantly more respectful at the mention of money.

"Suppose," said Devigne cautiously—"suppose I told you where you could meet him, on a lonely path, alone—would you do it?"

"Rather!" said Honest Jim. "Just try me—that's all?"

"But I don't want him hurt much. Mind, if he's hurt much I don't give you a shilling! If you do as I want I'll make it a pound for you."

"I'm your man, sir! But what do you want?"

"Could you tackle him, and—and hurt him a little, so that he couldn't play cricket for some weeks?" said Devigne eagerly. "Give him a crack on his right arm, or something, so as to prevent him from holding a bat!"

Honest Jim looked at him curiously.

"'Course I could, sir, and would. But that ain't much. I'd rather give him a crack over his head."

"That's not what I want, and, mind, unless you promise only to do what I say I won't help you. Besides, you want revenge on Tom Merry, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, sir!"

"Well, you can't do better than spoil his form for cricket. His heart is set on winning a certain match for his Form at Clavering, and he can't be more bitterly hurt than by losing it. He'll feel that more than a crack on his head, I assure you. You can't get a more complete revenge than by spoiling his cricket form, and it's not so—not so dangerous."

Honest Jim chuckled.

"I think I understand, sir, and I'll do exactly as you wish."

"Do so, and I'll meet you here the following evening and hand you the pound," said Devigne. "I can depend upon you?"

"Yes," said the tramp, feeling his cudgel. "I won't fail you, sir. You don't know how much I want to get at that nice young gentleman."

"Then it's settled. Now, to-morrow's Friday, and I happen to know that Tom Merry is going down to the village after dark. Never mind how I know. As a matter of fact, there's a chap in his Form who is jealous of him, and he tells me things—but that doesn't interest you. I'm sure of it, and that's enough. He's going down to High Clavering, and he'll go by the lane in the usual way, undoubtedly."

"Will he be alone, sir?"

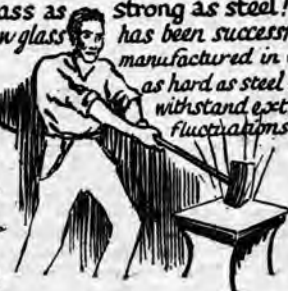
"I believe so. But if there were a lad with him, that wouldn't trouble a fellow of your size much."

Facts from Far and Near.

The Largest Relief Map in the World—600 feet long by 18 feet wide of the State of California—cost about £20,000 & more than 50 people were occupied for 9 months in making it.



Glass as strong as steel! A new glass has been successfully manufactured in Germany as hard as steel & able to withstand extreme fluctuations of heat



There is no camel's hair in a camel's hair brush—

The brushes are made from squirrel's hair



Bar of Iron worth £1, worked into horseshoes is worth £2: made into needles is worth £70: made into penknife blades is worth £50,000: made into balance-springs of watches is worth £50,000

"Not a bit; only another crack of the cudgel."

"You'll meet him in the shadows of the pine-trees, by the lane, where I met you going for him the other day," said Devigne. "Mind, you're not to really hurt him—only a crack on his right arm, to stop his batting on Saturday."

"I'll remember. What time will he be there?"

"It might be any time after seven, so you'd better be on the watch."

"Good! I'll be there!"

"Now I'd better go," said Devigne. "I rely on you. There's half-a-crown, and it will be a pound on Saturday night if all goes well. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, sir, and rely on Honest Jim!"

Devigne took his departure. The tramp curled himself up in the straw again and indulged in many a hoarse chuckle before he went to sleep.

Devigne strode back across the field towards Clavering School. He knew that he had made a dastardly compact with the ruffian, and that he was not fit to look his school-fellows in the face again. And there was a feeling of shame and half-regret in his breast. But mingled with that was a far stronger feeling—jealousy, and the determination that Tom Merry should not triumph in the Form match on Saturday. His old dislike of Tom had grown to absolute hatred in the last week or two. His own conduct towards Tom and the Shell had first brought about the friction, and led to the challenge which he had not wished to accept. Besides that, the Form match was the most sportsmanlike way of settling to whom the cap for the First Eleven should belong. But Devigne cared nothing for all that. He only saw himself in danger of being outshone and outdone by a boy he disliked, and that was sufficient to arouse all the evil in his nature.

He was late getting in at the school. He met Tom Merry as he was going in, and would have passed him without a glance or a word, and gone to his own room. But Tom came up to him with his most engaging smile.

"I say, Devigne, I wanted to speak to you!"

"Well, I don't want to speak to you," said Devigne. "Get out!"

Tom flushed.

"You need not take it like that!" he exclaimed. "I only wanted to say that I'm glad the match is coming off, and that I hope you don't bear any malice for a little fun!"

Devigne scowled.

"I don't want to have anything to say to you, Merry," he replied; and he turned his back on Tom and walked away.

Tom Merry gave an expressive whistle.

"Well, of all the pigs!" he ejaculated. "I didn't think Devigne was such an out-and-out hog, Monty."

Monty Lowther linked his arm in Tom's.

"Never mind," he said. "Come along. He knows he's going to be licked on Saturday, that's all, and that's what's the matter with him."

"I suppose that's it; and we will lick him, by Jupiter!" exclaimed Tom emphatically.

"Yes; and have a glorious feed in the study afterwards!"

CHAPTER 9.

Foul Play!

THE next day the Shell team practised hard every moment that they could get on the cricket-field.

They had succeeded in their object, and compelled the Upper Fifth to accept their challenge. It would be too bad to receive a licking for their pains, and so the cricketers of the Middle School were determined to put their best foot foremost and leave no stone unturned to snatch a victory.

The Upper Fifth were equally busy on their side. Edgar Devigne did not believe that Tom Merry would be in batting form, but he left nothing to chance. The Upper Fifth Eleven were in pretty good form, and pretty confident of victory. Felgate, looking on at the Upper Fifth practising, felt that Devigne's form did not come up to Tom Merry's; but he did not intend to make his final decision till after the Form match. That match would decide for good and for all whether Tom Merry or Edgar Devigne should have the cap for the Clavering First.

After school Manners and his team played a scratch match with a team picked out of the Shell and the Lower Fourth. Manners was the Shell captain, although Tom Merry could easily have had that position if he had chosen. But Tom, though he was very often coming before the public eye in a more or less startling manner, was really a modest lad.

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and not at all given to pushing himself forward. He was quite content to follow the leadership of Manners.

The cricketers played on as long as the light lasted, and then returned in good humour to their quarters. Manners was quite satisfied with his team. He knew that there was a hard tussle before the Shell on the morrow, but he felt that his men were equal to it, and had more than a sporting chance of beating the senior Form.

"Just time to cut down to the village," said Tom cheerfully, after tea in the study. "That pass from Daly covers to-day, you know. Unluckily, it's only for one."

"Never mind. If you go on your bike it won't be a



The Upper Fifth came dropping down from their

long run," said Monty Lowther; "and as you've got a pass you will be able to take the jigger out."

"Yes, that's a bit of luck."

And Tom wheeled his bike out of the Close, mounted in the road, and pedalled off towards High Clavering.

The country road was very dusty, and in the place where Tom had met Honest Jim, under the shadow of the pine-trees, it was almost dark.

As Tom neared the spot he remembered his meeting with the tramp, and cast a glance to right and left as he

pedalled on. He had been coming uphill, and just past the pines was a slope, somewhat steep, down which the Clavering lads loved to free-wheel. Suddenly a burly figure loomed up in the road.

"So it is you!"

It was the voice of Honest Jim.

A slashing cudgel swept the air, and Tom only eluded it by bending low and throwing himself sideways, and, of course, he went over with a crash, the bicycle clanging down on its side.

Tom Merry was on his feet in a flash. He had escaped that terrible blow, but he knew that another was coming. Honest Jim was making for him. There was a clatter and a curse. The scoundrel had stumbled over the fallen bicycle.

Tom saw the heavy fall of the ruffian, and his gasp of pain as his shin came in violent contact with a pedal. And Tom acted quickly. He was shaken and hurt by the shock of his fall, but his brain was clear and rapid. He did not attempt to run. He knew it would be useless. In a twinkling Tom had flung himself upon the ruffian.

Honest Jim gave a yell. His position was an awkward one, sprawled across the fallen machine, with one of his hands through the spokes of the front wheel; and Tom,

came down heavily, with his knees in the ruffian's back. The villain gasped faintly. His spinal column must have suffered from the crash of Tom's knees upon it, and for a few moments he was overcome.

"You—you beast!" gasped Tom. "Are you going to give in?"

"Lemme get at you!"

"Thanks, I'd rather not! Are you giving in?"

For reply, the ruffian began to struggle furiously. Tom dashed his face down in the road again, and Honest Jim gasped. Then the boy reached over the machine for the pump, and jerked it off.

"Now, you hound!"

Honest Jim made another tremendous upheaval.

Crash!

The bicycle pump descended on the top of his head with stunning force.

The pump was bent with the blow, and Honest Jim dropped flat. Tom, in his excitement, gave him another, which almost made the pump straight again. Honest Jim lay still.

"Now, then, you beast!"

The ruffian moaned faintly, but did not struggle. He was not stunned, but very near it, and Tom realised that he was helpless—at least, for a time.

He rose and dragged the ruffian off his bike. Could he get away before Honest Jim was able to recover sufficiently to attack him again? As he lifted the machine upright he heard Honest Jim muttering a curse.

The machine had not been improved by the crash into the road, and it seemed rather shaky, but it was still in a condition for riding.

Honest Jim staggered to his feet, his hand pressed to his head. Tom was in the saddle, and the pedals were going. The ruffian realised that his prey was escaping him. He leaned blindly forward, clutching at Tom. Tom, leaning over the handles, pedalled like lightning.

He was only just in time, for Honest Jim barely missed him, and, falling forward as his clutch swept the empty air, went down into the road again, his hands knocking upon Tom's rear mudguard as he fell.

Tom felt the touch on the mudguard, and it acted like a spur. Right on he went.

There was a growl of rage behind him, a pounding of pursuing feet, then a clack from his machine under him, and a horrid jamming. The fall had injured the bike, and something was wrong with the chain. Tom's heart turned cold for a moment.

The ruffian was close behind. But the bicycle was on the slope now, and it was not necessary to pedal. As Tom's feet ceased to revolve the pace slackened, and the ruffian came closer. But just as success seemed within his grasp the bicycle gathered speed on the slope and shot forward like an arrow.

Tom, bending low over the handle-bars, went shooting forward. The sound of the ruffian's footsteps died away behind him.

For some minutes Tom thought of nothing but escaping. He went on as fast as the machine could go, but he soon realised that he was safe.

He put on the brake and stopped. He was nearly at the bottom of the hill now, and the houses of the village were clear ahead of him.

He wheeled the bicycle into High Clavering, where he left it at a shop to be repaired and sent back to the school.

In spite of his perilous adventure and his narrow escape, he had not forgotten his mission, and as soon as he had disposed of the injured jigger he made his way to the village tuckshop.

There he made his purchases, and filled the cricket bag he had brought with the goods destined to regale the cricketers of the Shell after the glorious victory they intended to win on the morrow.

Before leaving High Clavering he dropped in at the police station and gave an account of the happening on the road, and the inspector promised that Honest Jim should be looked for.

Tom was careful to make his way back to Clavering by a devious route, but the hour was very late when he arrived at the school. His pass from the prefect secured him. But his chums were getting anxious about him, and Monty and Manners were waiting for him in the Close, and met him as soon as he was inside the gate.

"Hallo, you image! Where have you been all this time?" exclaimed Manners. "It's only ten minutes to bedtime."

"And where's your bike?" asked Lowther.

Tom Merry explained.

"My hat!" exclaimed Manners. "That fellow ought to be in prison, and no mistake! I hope the police will catch

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and lost no time in coming to blows with the Shell!

suddenly plumping on top of him, crushed him down on the bicycle and hurt him considerably.

The cudgel had flown from his hand into the road. Tom was upon him like a tiger, and his knees were planted in the ruffian's back, and his hands gripped Honest Jim's collar behind.

Honest Jim's nose was ground into the dust of the road with terrific force, and he gasped for breath, and with pain. He made a tremendous effort to free himself. But Tom, though he was almost heaved into the air, stuck fast and

him. Lucky he did not hurt you much, Tom, or you wouldn't have been able to play the Upper Fifth to-morrow."

"Yes, it was a narrow shave," said Tom. "As it was, I think he got the worst of it. Let's get this stuff put out of sight and get to bed. We've got to be up bright and early for a final practice."

And the heroes of the Shell were soon in bed. Meanwhile, Edgar Devigne was in his study, in a very dubious and anxious mood. He had marked Tom's departure, and knew about the time he ought to have returned, and when he did not come in Devigne had little doubt that he had fallen a victim to the brutality of the savage tramp.

Yet, as the evening advanced, he was rather surprised that there was nothing said about Tom Merry—either his absence or his returning injured. For fear of exciting suspicion, Devigne dared not leave his study to see what had happened.

As a matter of fact, no one was likely to suspect him, but a guilty conscience knows no quiet or ease. He felt that if he mentioned the name of Tom Merry he would betray in his face that he had had a hand in the dastardly attack upon him.

When the Shell went up to bed he wondered what had transpired. Presently Cary went into his room to say good-night.

"Hallo!" said Devigne, with assumed carelessness. "Any news?"

Cary stared at him.

"No. What news should there be? I say, you're not well, Edgar."

"I'm well enough."

"You're rather white. I hope you're not going to crack up for the match to-morrow."

"I shall be all right," said Devigne savagely, wondering what had happened to Tom Merry, and whether anything had happened at all. "We shall win. Of course, Merry is counting on licking us. Seen him lately?"

"No. I believe he's out with a permit."

"Hasn't he come in yet?"

"I suppose so, as the Shell's gone to bed. What's the matter with you, Devigne? You're mighty curious about Tom Merry."

Devigne turned red.

"Well, I was wondering whether he's in good form for to-morrow, that's all, Cary."

"Oh, depend upon it, he's in good form!" said Cary. "He means to beat us if he can!"

It was evident that if anything had happened to Tom it was not known over the school. Cary had clearly heard nothing.

"Well, good-night, Devigne!" he said, and left his chum in a very dubious frame of mind.

Had the plot succeeded? Had Honest Jim failed? Edgar Devigne went to bed in a worried mood, and it was long before he slept—a very bad preparation for a hard match on the morrow!

CHAPTER 10.

A Glorious Victory.

THE next day dawned bright and warm and clear, much to the satisfaction of the cricketers of Clavering College. It was fine cricketers' weather, and just the day Tom Merry had hoped for for the Form match with the Upper Fifth.

The Shell were out early on their ground for a last bit of practice before school, and Manners, the skipper, was perfectly satisfied with his team. When they came in to breakfast a welcome bit of news awaited them.

In order to allow good time for the match to be played out to a satisfactory conclusion, Mr. Railton, at Felgate's suggestion, had announced that lessons would cease at an earlier hour than was customary on Saturday mornings, allowing the stumps to be pitched at half-past eleven o'clock.

"Good!" said Manners, rubbing his hands. "Railton's a jolly good sport. He's an old sport, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, and don't forget it. When it comes to being a real sportsman, I'd put my twopence on Railton every time!"

"Thank you, Manners!" said a quiet voice at the exuberant Manners' elbow. "That's very complimentary of you, I'm sure!"

Manners' jaw dropped as he heard the Head's voice. He stared at Mr. Railton in dismay, not finding a word to say. The Head of Clavering smiled.

"I am much obliged for your good opinion, Manners," he said; "but don't you think you could express it a little more elegantly if you tried?"

Manners was scarlet.

"Yes, sir," he stammered.

"Very good."

And, with a nod, Mr. Railton walked away.

"Well," said Manners, with a deep breath, "some masters would have given me fifty lines for that. He's a jolly good sort!"

Shortened as the morning lessons were, they seemed all too long to the heroes of the Shell, who were anxious to get to business on the cricket pitch.

More than once during the German lesson Tom Merry brought down upon himself the wrath of Herr Schneider and accumulated enough lines to take one's breath away; but he did not care, so long as he was not wanted to do them that afternoon.

Herr Schneider would have been quite willing to detain him that afternoon, as a matter of fact, but he felt that it wouldn't do. Felgate would have appealed to Mr. Railton, who would have put his foot down hard.

Lessons were over at last and the boys were free. The stumps were pitched, and the umpires went over the ground. As Tom came out of the class-room he met Edgar Devigne face to face.

Devigne was strangely pale, and he looked at Tom with burning eyes. All through the morning he had been in an unenviable frame of mind. He had seen Tom at practice with the Shell before breakfast, and so he now knew for certain that Honest Jim had failed.

Then he had learned the story of Tom's adventure from Gore. Honest Jim had done his best, but Tom's luck had been true to him. He had escaped injury, where almost anybody else would have fallen a victim.

The plot which had seemed to promise Devigne an absolute certainty of victory had been an utter failure. Tom was bruised a little, but otherwise not hurt, and his form for the cricket match was in no way impaired.

He was looking as fresh as fiddle, as fit as a fiddle, as he met Devigne; and in the Fifth-Former's heart was a sickening presentiment of coming defeat. It was not only that Tom was in fine form, but he himself was decidedly off colour, for worry and anxiety, jealousy and remorse, disappointment and envy, are feelings that are not compatible with a perfect physical condition.

Potts, the Office Boy.



Devigne felt disturbed, nervous, unstrung. To add to his discomfort, he realised that if he had played a manly and straightforward part—if he had sought only to win by fair play and good cricket—he would be feeling much more fresh and fit now that the hour of trial had come.

If he had played the game! He wished now that he had done so; but it was too late!

Tom Merry was rather surprised by the expression upon Devigne's face, but his own was perfectly cordial and good-tempered.

"Jolly good weather for the match!" he said cheerily. "It will be a good game!"

"I hope so!" said Devigne. "You shan't get the cap for the First Eleven if I can help it!"

Tom bit his lips. He wanted to be on good and cordial terms with everybody; but it was very hard indeed to get along comfortably with a fellow like Edgar Devigne.

"I wish you wouldn't look at it like that," he said. "I suppose you want the best man to go into Clavering First, don't you? And this seems to me to be the really best way of settling the point."

"Humbug!" said Devigne.

And he walked on with a sneer on his face.

"That chap will make me ill," murmured Tom to himself. "I'm blessed if I shall try to be civil to him any more. He looks in pretty rotten form for a hard tussle. However, that's his business."

"Come on, Tom!" called out Monty Lowther. "Come and get into your flannels!"

"Right-ho!" said Tom cheerily.

And Tom Merry was soon arrayed in spotless white, and he walked to the ground, in company with Monty Lowther, with his bat under his arm. The pavilion was pretty well filled, for nearly all the masters at Clavering were anxious to see the match. Round the ropes two-thirds of the school were gathered.

The Fifth were there to cheer their champions, and the Shell for a like purpose. The rest of the school were ready to applaud any good play on either side.

The two captains tossed, and Devigne correctly named the coin, and elected to bat. This brought a gleam of satisfaction to Devigne's face. To go in first, when the pitch was in first-class condition, was an advantage to start with.

The Upper Fifth opened their innings with Devigne and Cary.

Manners sent Monty Lowther on to bowl the first over.

Mr. Railton was seated in the pavilion, and Felgate was standing by his side. Both were watching the opening of the game with keen interest. Herr Schneider was sitting near, looking on. The German took not the slightest interest in cricket, but it was a lovely day, so he thought he might as well be there as anywhere else. He had a deckchair, and he wore his spectacles and a big white hat.

Manners had placed his men to field, himself as wicket-keeper. Monty Lowther sent down the first ball to Edgar Devigne, and the great game had started.

Devigne made a good start. He was certainly not in his best form, but against average bowling he was able to keep his end up, and he did it.

The Fifth Form cheered him lustily as he placed the balls carefully between the fieldsmen, and he had 7 to his credit when the field crossed over.

French delivered the second over, still to Devigne, from the other end. French was a fair bowler of the slow variety,

and it was soon pretty evident that his bowling was not dangerous to Devigne. After a couple of 2's Devigne realised it, and he began to let himself go a little. The third ball he swung away to the boundary, and took 4 without the trouble of running.

The fourth ball he intended to treat in the same way. The clack of wood meeting leather was followed by the whizzing flight of the ball, and the Fifth Form shouted; but then the Shell began to shout, too!

For Tom Merry, at cover-point, was running, swerving, backing, twisting, as it looked, like a snake, to get under that ball, which was coming down from the air fairly to his hands; and the shout of the Shell became a joyous roar.

"Caught!"

"Oh, well caught!"

The leather was in the palms of Tom Merry, and the captain of the Upper Fifth was out!

Devigne gripped the cane handle of his bat as if he would have liked to knock Tom Merry down with it, as, indeed, was quite the case at that moment. Then he slowly walked away towards the pavilion.

Mr. Railton turned to Felgate, with a smile.

"Merry seems to be an extremely good field!" he remarked. "That was a fine catch!"

"Yes, sir; and hard luck on Devigne!"

"The fortune of the game," remarked the Head.

Saunders was next man in. French was better able to deal with him than with Devigne, and Saunders retired gracefully, with a big round 0 to his credit.

The innings went on, the wickets falling for a fair average of runs. Cary batted well for twenty-five, the highest score made by any of his side.

By a smart return from the country, Tom accounted for Cary's wicket as he was making one more, and Devigne's friend joined his captain in the pavilion. Both of them were looking rather glum.

"Merry is certainly a demon at cricket!" Cary remarked frankly. "You see that he's a dangerous beast in the field, and when he starts batting—"

"Oh, don't talk about it!" growled Devigne.

"Well, we shall see it soon," said Cary. "You said Merry wouldn't be in form to-day, Edgar, but you were off the mark."

"Accidents will happen!" snapped Devigne. "I've been unlucky."

Cary whistled.

"You don't mean to say you had anything to do with that tramp?" he paused.

"I don't mean to say anything. Hallo, there's Merry going on to bowl! I fancy he can't do much with the leather."

Tom Merry had taken the ball to deliver an over. There was a deafening roar from the crowd when the first ball had gone down.

"Well bowled!"

Tom had taken a wicket with his first ball. Felgate's eyes glistened.

"My hat! I think that's our man, sir! He's on the war-path!"

And the Head of Clavering nodded assent.

The Fifth Form were most silent now. The innings was drawing to a close, and a quarter of an hour before the time fixed for lunch it ended, with a total of exactly 100 runs for the side.

"Not at all bad," commented Felgate. "But I am very

Sacked For Nothing!



much mistaken if the Shell do not beat it. Unless Devigne picks up in his second innings, he's done in!"

Lunch over, the ground was crowded for the Shell innings. Manners had put Tom down first with Monty Lowther, and the two were greeted with cheers as they came out of the pavilion. Devigne placed his men to field, and went on to bowl himself. He tried his own powers against Tom Merry's wicket, but in vain. Tom was in splendid form. He hit the leather all over the field, and piled up twelve for the over.

Their innings was a blaze of glory for the Shell and like a nightmare to their opponents. For none of the Upper Fifth bowlers could touch Tom Merry. Whatever they sent down to him he sent back, and the runs mounted up.

The Shell's score was at 40, of which 32 belonged to Tom Merry, when Monty Lowther's wicket fell to a yorker from Devigne.

Manners came in and joined him. He lived through several overs, and added fifteen to the score before he was caught out by Saunders.

French came in. French was a good batsman of the stone-wall variety, and just the partner Tom Merry wanted. He backed up Tom splendidly and unselfishly, not troubling much about making runs himself, but helping Tom all he could.

Tom had most of the bowling, and there was none of it he could not handle to his own perfect satisfaction.

The Upper Fifth had enough of leather-hunting to last them for the rest of their lives, as it seemed to the red-faced fieldsman panting after the elusive ball.

The cheers of the crowd for each successive hit were continuous.

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CLAVERHOUSE"**

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Tom's figure was at eighty, and he was still batting splendidly, when French left him, and Jimson came in. Jimson had bad luck, being caught at point by Devigne with only a single run to his credit. It began to look as if Tom Merry would be "not out" as well as first in. Nothing seemed able to touch him.

"Bravo!" cried Felgate, clapping his hands, as Tom and Harris ran out a four.

"Bravo, kid!"

And Mr. Railton joined in the cheer.

Herr Schneider looked up with an irritable expression. He was there in his big hat, sitting in his deckchair, and had taken out a book to read, and the cheering disturbed him.

"Mein gootness!" he murmured. "I vill go mit meinselt to some quieter place, ain't it? Dis is a prutal noise!"

And he rose and picked up his deckchair. The next moment he gave a fiendish yell.

Tom Merry had received another ball from Devigne, and sent it on its journey with a mighty swipe.

Where had it gone?

The yell of the unfortunate German master told. Herr Schneider was staggering forward, with his white hat turned into a concertina.

"Mein grashus! Mein hat! Mein grashus!"

"Chuck that ball back!" cried Devigne.

A junior picked it up and returned it, while the German master, saying things in his own language that he would not have dared to say in English, stalked away in a fury, followed by a shout of laughter.

The afternoon was wearing away, and Tom was still batting. It began to look as if the Upper Fifth would have no chance of retrieving their fortunes by a second innings. But Manners had already decided about that.

"We'll let Tom get his century and then declare," he said to Monty Lowther; and a little later a tremendous roar announced that the champion of the Shell had completed his century.

The score was now at 170, and Manners declared. It was not in very high spirits that Devigne and his men went in for their second innings. They had gloomy forebodings as to how it would result, and their forebodings were more than justified.

The Shell were out for scalps, with a vengeance. Devigne's wicket fell for twenty-six, but no other batsman of the Upper Fifth came anywhere near that score. For Tom Merry was bowling almost as well as he had been batting, and with three successive balls he laid three of the Upper Fifth wickets in ruins.

And a deafening shout greeted his performance of the hat trick.

The Upper Fifth went on to bat now with desperate faces. And they came out almost as fast as they went in. The whole innings was over in an hour.

There was still plenty of light, but there was no need for the Shell to begin a second innings, for the total of the Upper Fifth for their second time at the wickets was only 50, which, added to their former score, made 150.

And the Shell's first innings had beaten that by twenty runs.

The Shell were victorious! Not only victorious, but completely and overwhelmingly so, with a whole innings to spare!

Tom and his chums had hoped for victory, but they had never anticipated so sweeping a one, and they were highly delighted.

Tom, the hero of the hour, was carried off the field on the shoulders of his comrades when the last wicket fell, and they bore him up to the pavilion. There Mr. Railton shook hands with him, with a smile and a few cordial words of congratulations, and Felgate slapped him on the shoulder with a word that pleased him still more.

"We shall want you, Merry!" exclaimed the captain of Clavering. "You're just the fellow we want in the First Eleven!"

"You mean it, Felgate?"

Tom's eyes were dancing with delight.

"Rather! You're a member of Clavering First for our next match!"

And the whole Shell burst into a deafening cheer.

"Hurrah for Tom Merry! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

THE END.

(Tom's gained another step upwards in his school career, but he looks like having to start all over again in next week's great yarn, "GOOD-BYE, CLAVERING—HULLO, ST. JIM'S!")

"I've got a query here," said the Ed., "from a reader who has just come back from a week away in the country. He's been looking at all the thatched cottages, and he wants to know how a thatch is put on."

"I know a good deal about thatches," I told the Ed.

"Well, my lad," said he, "you've lost your thatch all right. But just let us hear about these thatches on cottages!"

"The thatches on cottages," I explained, "are made of wheat straw, and it is put on in layers to a thickness of anything between twelve and eighteen inches. A roof made of unthreshed straw will last for thirty years, and a still stronger roof is made in Norfolk, where they use the reeds from the marshes. A thatch made of these reeds will last for forty years or more. Thatched roofs are not allowed in London, of course, on account of the danger from fire, though thatched roofs can be made by soaking them with a solution of lime. They make splendid roofs, as they are cool in summer and warm in the winter."

"Good," said the Ed. "Now here's a question about the tarantella. Can you tell Will Goodson what a tarantella is, please?"

"A tarantella is the name of a very lively dance in Italy, in which the dancers whirl round at a great rate. This dance gets its name in a very curious way. You may have heard, Ed., of a spider called the tarantula?"

"No," said the Ed. "What's the tarantula like?"

"Well, Ed., I explained, "the tarantula spider is a spider that at one time was believed to have a poisonous bite, and anyone being bitten by a tarantula spider was said to have what was called tarantism. The symptoms of tarantism were a feeling of sleepiness and depression, and the cure was supposed to consist in the patient dancing wildly about until they dropped down on the floor in a perspiration. That is how the whirling Italian dance got to be known as the tarantella."

"Now can you tell Will Sloggs what a cheroot is?"

"A cheroot is a cigar made from tobacco grown in Southern India and the Philippine Islands. Both ends of a cheroot are cut square, unlike an ordinary cigar, the name rolled with a point. The name cheroot, which is also sometimes spelt sheroot, comes from a Tamil word 'shurutu,' which means a roll."

"Can you tell a Battersea reader what a commodore is?"

"A commodore is a temporary rank in the British Navy for an officer in command of a squadron. A commodore will sometimes hold the temporary rank and pay of a rear-admiral. A senior officer of a squadron of more than three vessels is known as a commodore; the name is also given to the president of a yacht club like the Royal Yacht Squadron, and also to the senior captain of a fleet of merchant vessels."

"Here's a reader who signs himself 'Dog Lover,' and he wants us to explain

one or two terms he's come across in descriptions of dogs. For instance, he would like to know what is meant by a blaze on a dog?"

"A blaze," said I, "is the term in dog circles for a white mark on a dog's face."

"What part of a dog is the briskeet?"

"The part in front of the dog's chest."

"What's a button ear?"

"When the tip of the ear on a dog falls over and covers the ear, it's called a button ear. When the tip turns back it's known as a rose ear. The term for an ear that stands up straight."

"What is the haw?"

"That's the red inside of the dog's eyelid. You see the haw in bloodhounds and St. Bernards."

"And last of all, what is meant by a dog being pily?"

"A dog is said to have a pily coat when the coat is soft."

"You seem to know all about it," said the Ed. "Now can you answer this one from Willie Fleming. He asks why the East Kent regiments are called 'The Buffs'?"

"I can tell Will all about that. Years ago the skin of the buffalo, when it was made into leather, was called buff, and its colour was a dull pale yellow. Leather jerkins and coats made of this leather were called buff-coats, and in time the word came to be used for any material that was pale yellow. The East Kents have yellow facings on their dress uniforms, and that is how they got the name of 'The Buffs.'"

"What is a burgee?"

"That is a small pennant or flag, three-cornered or swallow-tailed, flown by yachts and merchant vessels. A certain kind of small coal burnt in engine furnaces is also known as burgee."

"What is a tallboy?" asked the Ed.

next.

"A tallboy, Ed., used to be the name given to a very high chest of drawers that was in use a couple of hundred years ago. They were usually made of mahogany or walnut, and used to be used as wardrobes. They were so high that people had to use bed steps to reach the top of them."

"What are bed steps?"

"Bed steps, Ed., I explained, "were steps kept in bed-rooms in the old days. You see, beds were made so high up that you couldn't get into them without steps."

"I see." The old Ed. looked rather thoughtful. "In the old days they took steps to get into bed, did they?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's a pity some of you don't take steps to get out of bed," said he. "I mean to get out a bit earlier than you do. Perhaps you could manage to get to the office a little while before lunch."

"The fact of the matter is, Ed.," said I, "I've been a bit late lately, because I'm living out in the country. And I've got no end of things to do before I catch my train. First of all, I have to shake all the silkworms out of my whiskers, then I

Ask Here for Answers to Questions.



If you want to know anything—don't ask a policeman—ask Whiskers!

have to find the tortoise and give its jolly old shell a rub up, like they tortoise at school, and then I have to look in the chicken house to see if there are any eggs, and pick out a nice big one for breakfast, and after that I begin mowing the lawn, I mean mowing the lawn, and if I find a few snails me and my nephews have a few snail races—that's very exciting, Ed., believe me. You get six or seven snails, and put 'em in a row, and then you let 'em start racing each other. The pace those snails set up is a marvel, it is really."

"Look here," said the Ed., "talking of tortoises, I've got a question here about tortoiseshell. A Harringay reader wants to know if the shell of his tortoise would be any good for making a tortoiseshell comb."

"You can tell him, Ed., that tortoiseshell is made from the plates of the hawksbill turtle, which is the smallest of the sea turtles. These plates are removed from the bony skeleton of the dead turtle by heat, and then flattened out by heat and pressure. The heat softens a film on the shell and enables different pieces to be welded together. This material has always been a highly thought of substance for ornamentation. The old Egyptians used to use it a lot, and nowadays it is used in inlaying cabinet work. Furniture with tortoiseshell inlay is known as buhl."

"I see," said the Ed. "But isn't there a lot of imitation tortoiseshell sold?"

"A close imitation can be made by staining horn or by certain varieties of celluloid, but they're not like the real thing."

"What's in the GEM next week, Whiskers?" asked the Ed.

"To start with, sir," I said, "there's a side-splitting yarn by Martin Clifford. It's called 'Good-bye, Clavering—Hullo, St. Jim's!' The office boy says it's a wow!"

"What is a wow?" asked the old Ed. "A wow, Ed.," I answered, "is the type of top-hole story that you always find in the GEM!"

"What else will there be in next week's issue?"

"There will be another ripping Rookwood yarn by Owen Conquest, called 'Stocking the Stocks!'"

"And what," asked the Editor, "does the office boy say about that yarn?"

"He hasn't read it yet, Ed. I have been reading it, so he hasn't had a chance. And, believe me, it's a great yarn. There will also be another splendid instalment of 'The Cricketer Crackman!'"

"Very well," said the Ed., "you can go now, Whiskers, and if you think of anything you don't know, just tell me; I'm sure my readers would like to hear it."

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JIMMY SILVER & CO. IN A COMPLETE NEW ROOKWOOD STORY.

TUBBY MUFFIN—ARTIST!

By OWEN CONQUEST.



CHAPTER 1. Tubby's Cartoon!

"He, he, he!" Jimmy Silver glanced in surprise at Tubby Muffin.

There was nothing unusual in Tubby Muffin sniggering; it was one of Cecil Reginald's little habits that did not endear him to his schoolfellows. But it was unusual for him to do it in the Form-room when Dicky Dalton was there.

It was surprising, in fact, the more so because less than ten minutes ago Tubby had been groaning dismally from the effects of Mr. Dalton's cane.

Now, it seemed, he was asking for it again.

"Shut up, you fat ass!" whispered Jimmy. "You'll get it again if Dicky hears you!"

"He, he, he!"

It almost looked as if Tubby wanted it again.

"What's the giddy joke, anyway?" asked Jimmy Silver curiously.

"He, he, he! Look at this, Jimmy?" sniggered Tubby, showing Jimmy a sheet of exercise paper. "Like the beast—what?"

Jimmy glanced at the sheet. On the sheet was the crude drawing of a man—a man with a pig's face!

From the fact that the animal sported a mortar-board and a gown, Jimmy guessed that it was meant to represent Mr. Dalton, master of the Fourth. To make everyone sure of this, however, Tubby had printed an inscription underneath in large letters:

"DICKY DALTON IS A PIG!"

Jimmy tried hard not to grin.

"You—you benighted ass!" he breathed. "If Dicky sees that—"

"He's going to see it, Jimmy!" giggled Tubby. "I'll show him! I'm going to shove this on his desk when—" Tubby broke off abruptly. Just then Mr. Dalton looked up from his desk, his eagle eye upon the artist.

"Stop talking, there! Muffin, what is that?"

"My—my essay, sir!" gasped Tubby, hastily turning over the cartoon and standing up.

"Have you finished it, Muffin?"

"Oh, y-e-es, sir!"

Tubby had finished. The Form had been set to write an essay on Henry the Eighth, and what Tubby knew concerning that much-married king did not take him long to set down.

Tubby shivered, fully expecting the master to ask to see his essay. But the danger passed for the moment. Mr. Dalton looked up at the clock.

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Young Master Muffin
Is pantin' and puffin'
And following Dalton in terror,
For the silly buffoon
Has drawn a cartoon
And sent it to Dicky in error!

"Time is up, boys," he said, rising from his desk. "I will collect your essays now."

Mr. Dalton started to collect the essays. As Tubby Muffin was sitting next to the end boy on the front row, it was a time for swift action.

Tubby whipped the sheet of paper from his desk and shoved it beneath him on the form.

Next moment Mr. Dalton loomed above him. With trembling fingers Tubby sorted out his essay on Henry the Eighth and handed it over.

Mr. Dalton passed on without a glance at it.

"Near thing, Tubby!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "If Dicky had spotted it—"

"I was too jolly quick for him!" grinned Tubby. "It's here!"

Having made sure Mr. Dalton wasn't looking, Tubby cautiously withdrew the sheet from under him and glanced at it gleefully. Then he jumped.

Save for a huge blot of ink on it, the sheet was empty.

"Oh! Oh crikey!" gasped Tubby.

The cartoonist nearly fainted in sheer horror. Then he started to root frantically among the papers on his desk. In writing his essay Tubby had spoiled a good few sheets of exercise paper. But the cartoon of Dicky Dalton was not among them.

What had happened to it? Only one thing could have happened. He must have handed the cartoon to Dicky Dalton with his essay!

"Oh! Oh crikey!"

"What's the matter, Tubby?" whispered Jimmy Silver, with a soft chuckle.

"Oh lor! It—it's awful, Jimmy!" groaned Tubby, going quite white. "I—I say, I must have given Dalton that drawing with my essay! Oh crikey!"

The bell for end of lessons sounded just then, and Tubby almost tottered out as the juniors were dismissed. He found Jimmy Silver & Co. outside, and they grinned at him.

"It's nothing to laugh about!" groaned Tubby dismally.

"I say, what shall I do, Jimmy? That beast's bound to find it when he goes through our essays! It—it's too awful!"

"Well, you deserve a lesson for being such a chump!" grinned Jimmy Silver.

"Quite sure you handed it to Dicky, old fat man?"

"I must have done!" wailed Tubby. "I was so afraid he'd spot it that I hardly knew what I was doing, you know. I thought I'd shoved it under me, and I must have picked up a bare sheet instead. Oh crikey! I've simply got to get it back before he sees it, Jimmy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's nothing to laugh about, you heartless beasts!" groaned Tubby, almost tearfully. "I say, you fellows might help a fellow. Look here, I know how to work it." Tubby added eagerly. "You slip in, Jimmy, and tell Dalton the Head wants him—urgently, you know! Tell him it's frightfully important! Then—"

"You fat chump—"

"Then Lovell can nip in, go through the essays while he's away, and bag the cartoon," said Tubby anxiously.

"While you stand here and run no risks—what?" grinned Jimmy.

"Yes—I mean, no—not at all! If you funk a little job like that—" began Tubby scornfully.

"We does, fatty!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "But I'll tell you a better wheeze than that, Tubby. You creep inside now—"

"Eh—go on, Jimmy!"

"And collar the poker!"

"The—the poker?"

"Yes. Collar the poker when Dicky Dalton isn't looking and hit him on the napper with it!" suggested Jimmy Silver seriously. "Then, when he's lying stunned, you'll be able to bag your giddy cartoon—see?"

"Why, you—you ass!" spluttered Tubby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked away, laughing. Evidently there was no help to be expected from them—not the sort of help Tubby suggested, at all events.

Tubby glared after them, and then he turned to the Form-room hopefully. There was just a chance to bag that tragic cartoon. When Mr. Dalton emerged and departed he would slip in and bone it.

But Tubby's hopes soon fled.

Even as he reached the door Mr. Dalton came out, and the two almost collided.

"Well, do you wish to see me, Muffin?" said Mr. Dalton.

"I—I— Nunno, sir!" gasped Tubby. "I—I was just going back for—for my handkerchief, sir. I must have left it—"

"Very well; you may get your handkerchief, Muffin."

Mr. Dalton walked off.

Tubby hid a faint grin, and entered the Form-room. His grin vanished the next moment as he saw that the exercise-papers were not on the desk. He hesitated a moment, and then he took the plunge and lifted the lid of the master's desk.

He peered hopefully inside. Then his heart sank, for the papers were not there.

"Oh dear!" groaned Tubby. "The beast must have——"
"Muffin!"

Tubby almost leapt a foot into the air. So startled was he that he let go the desk lid and it slammed down with a crash, shaking an inkwell from its place, and flooding the desk top with ink.

It was Mr. Dalton, evidently returning for something. He stood in the doorway, and stared angrily at Tubby.

"Muffin, how dare you interfere with my desk?"

Mr. Dalton entered the room. Tubby shook.

"I—I—I—" he gasped.

"What were you doing at my desk, Muffin?" thundered Dicky Dalton.

"I—I— Nothing, sir—nothing at all!" groaned the luckless Tubby. "I—I thought my—mum—my handkerchief might be in it; b-blown by the—the wind, you know. There—there's a fearful draught——"

"Silence! Enough! Bend over that chair, Muffin!"

"I—I assure you, sir——"

"Bend over that chair!"

Tubby bent over the chair. Dicky Dalton wasn't a man to argue with! The next moment the cane was raising the dust from Tubby's tightly-stretched bags with musical accompaniment from Tubby.

Tubby was bellowing when Mr. Dalton tired at last.

"There," he gasped. "That should teach you, Muffin, not to tell senseless untruths, and to avoid playing pranks upon your Form master! You will now obtain a duster, and you will remove every trace of ink from my desk."

With that Dicky Dalton locked the desk and departed.

And Tubby Muffin gave vent to one final, dismal groan as he went. For Mr. Dalton's gown was open, and sticking from his jacket pocket showed a bundle of exercise-papers—the essays!

Tubby knew only too well what that meant. It was a half-holiday that day, and very often the master spent parts of halves correcting exercises—on fine days, more often than not, out of doors. If Mr. Dalton had been going to correct them in his study he would have been carrying them in his hand.

And Tubby's last hope—that of raiding Mr. Dalton's study while at dinner—vanished, and he gave a deep, deep groan.

CHAPTER 2.

Tubby Takes the Plunge!

DINNER was a dismal meal for Tubby Muffin.

He found it decidedly painful to sit down, and the worry of wondering what would happen when Dicky Dalton came across that tragic cartoon quite took away his appetite.

The six he had just had would be nothing to what he

would get for that. Possibly Mr. Dalton, in his dire anger and indignation at being characterised by a junior as a pig, would take him before the Head, and that would mean a flogging, at least.

Certainly there was no name on the cartoon—nothing to show that he was responsible for it. Yet Tubby had a dismal feeling of certainty that Mr. Dalton would know he was the culprit at once. In any case, the mere fact that it would be found next to his essay would be enough. And the fact that he had been caught hunting in the master's desk would convince Mr. Dalton, if nothing else did.

But Tubby did not give up hope yet. At all costs he must get the drawing back before Dicky Dalton saw it—somehow. Tubby was resolved upon that. Immediately dinner was ended Tubby rushed off to Dicky Dalton's study before the latter could get there.

Again he drew blank, however. The papers were not on the desk, and Tubby dare not search for them. As it was, he only just got out of the study in the nick of time, escaping capture by a matter of seconds.

After that Tubby haunted Masters' corridor for the next hour, his eyes fixed anxiously on Mr. Dalton's study door. Jimmy Silver & Co. found him there on their way out of doors. Tubby's expression was so woebegone that they could not help laughing.

"Found your merry old drawing yet, Tubby?" inquired Jimmy Silver, with a chuckle.

"Haven't I told you Dalton's got it?" groaned Tubby dismally. "It's jolly serious, you fellows! I did expect some help from you. I say, Jimmy, something's got to be done to get it back. Can't you help a fellow out?"

"If you really want to be helped out, Tubby——"

"Of course I do! If it's not——"

"Then we'll help you out, old chap! Collar his other arm, Lovell! This way out, Tubby!"

"Here! Leggo! What the—— Oh crikey!"

Apparently there was some mistake. Instead of suggesting a way out of Tubby's scrape, the Fistical Four helped Tubby out in another way.

Before Tubby quite knew what was happening, he found himself grabbed on both sides and being rushed, at express speed, along the corridor.

Down the stairs they went at a terrific speed, Tubby's legs going like clockwork under him—they simply had to—and out into the quad with a rush.

"There, Tubby," said Jimmy Silver cheerily, as they released him, "that's helped you out, old man! Much better for you outside in the open air than mouching round Dalton's door asking for a licking!"

"Ow, ow, ow! Grooogh! You—you silly owls, I didn't mean outside!" spluttered Tubby, breathless and wrathful. "I meant——"

"Oh, you meant as far as the cricket field?" exclaimed



Before he quite knew what was happening Tubby found himself grabbed on each side and rushed at speed down the corridor!

Jimmy, in surprise. "Well, we always were good-natured and helpful chaps, and we're pleased you want to see the Sixth match. Good! Lend a hand to help poor old Tubby, you men!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Look here—Why—Leggo, you silly—Yarrooop!"

Grabbed on all sides by helpful hands, Tubby went off again with a rush. He yelled and bawled in desperate attempts to explain what help he really wanted, but his helpers seemed deaf. Not until they reached Big Side was Tubby released, and by that time he was almost in a state of collapse.

"Ow, ow, ow!" he gasped, fairly panting for breath.

"You—you silly owls!"

"If that's your gratitude, Tubby—"

"Ow, ow! I'm winded!" gurgled Tubby, glaring furiously at the grinning four. "You—you—"

"We're glad you're starting to take an interest in cricket, anyway, Tubby!" exclaimed Raby. "Any other time you want helping out—"

"But I didn't want helping out here, you—you silly idiots!" shrieked Tubby. "I didn't want to see the rotten cricket! I wanted—"

"Well, my hat! Why didn't you say so, then?" demanded Jimmy Silver, in surprise. "Come on, you men, we've wasted enough time on that ungrateful chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fifth and Fourth walked away, laughing. Tubby glared after them in speechless wrath and indignation, and then he started back for the House.

Crowds of fellows were making for Big Side, for the Sixth were playing the Fifth that afternoon, and practically the whole school meant to see the match. And suddenly Tubby paused. Coming towards him was the well-known athletic form of Dicky Dalton.

He had changed his jacket for a blazer. Striking from the pocket of the blazer was a thick roll of papers. Mr. Dalton was smoking his pipe, and over his shoulder was a towel and a swimming costume. Evidently the cricket field was not Mr. Dalton's sole destination that afternoon.

"Oh erums!" gasped Tubby.

He waited until Dicky Dalton had passed him, and then he trailed after the master. He was feeling more hopeful now. Obviously Mr. Dalton had not started work on the essays yet. Not until he actually did start work on them was Tubby likely to give up hope.

The match started, and soon the field was resounding to the merry click of bat against ball and the shouts of the spectators. But Tubby had no eyes or ears for cricket. His eyes were glued on the packet of papers in Mr. Dalton's pocket. Short of picking the master's pocket, Tubby wondered dismally how he was going to get hold of them.

Yet he had to do it somehow!

For nearly an hour Mr. Dalton watched the game, while Tubby Muffin watched him in growing anxiety and despair. But at last the master strolled away off the ground, still smoking his pipe.

Tubby's eyes gleamed, and he trailed after him.

The sight of the towel and bathing costume had brought a daring scheme into his mind. In his mind's eye Tubby could already see Mr. Dalton reclining at ease on the grassy slope by the river, smoking his pipe as he corrected the essays.

But would he look them over before bathing or after bathing? Tubby's daring scheme depended upon that!

Tubby soon knew. At a safe distance, Tubby, trailing behind, saw the master reach the senior bathing hut and vanish inside. That meant he was going to bathe first.

"Oh, good!" breathed Tubby thankfully.

He had got his chance at last—or soon would have!

Mr. Dalton emerged from the bathing hut at last, clad in his costume. Without a glance round, he ran down the grassy slope and plunged into the senior bathing pool. Then he went off up-stream with swift, overarm strokes.

Tubby drew a deep breath. It was now or never.

Not another soul was in sight. All the seniors were on the cricket field, and the senior swimming pool was out of bounds to juniors. Moreover, it was a rather chilly day for summer, and only a hardy Spartan like Dicky Dalton was likely to want a swim that afternoon.

Still Tubby hesitated. To reach the bathing hut Tubby had to cover a good distance of open ground. At any moment Mr. Dalton might turn round.

It was no good. Tubby Muffin was no hero, and dare not risk it. He stood in shivering indecision while Dicky Dalton swam on. And then a brain wave came to Tubby.

In the shelter of the trees and bushes Tubby scudded round to the back of the hut. Yes, as he expected, the little window at the rear of the hut was wide open. Tubby grinned and slipped to the little lean-to shed against the rear of the hut. Here was kept a lifebelt, ropes, boat-hooks, and other articles of like nature.

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There was also an old packing-case in the shed, and, dragging it out, Tubby shoved it beneath the little window. Then he got a boathook and jumped up on the box.

He could see into the dimly-lit bathing hut now, and he could see a jumble of clothes on one of the lockers. Through the open doorway he could also get a glimpse of the river and the swimmer.

Tubby grinned, shoved the boathook through the window, and started to "fish" for the master's blazer.

He found he could just reach his objective, and he was just getting a bite on the blazer with his hook when suddenly he gave a startled gasp.

Mr. Dalton had just scrambled ashore, and was running towards the hut. Evidently he had found the water a trifle too cold for a lengthy swim. At any rate he was coming out, and—

"Oh! Oh crikey!" gasped Tubby.

He made a desperate jab with the hook, got a bite on the pile of clothing, and pulled it towards him desperately.

Dodging back through the window, he yanked the boathook out after him, and grabbed at the clothing on the end of it. He could hear the patter of feet now, and Tubby quite lost his head then in sudden terror.

But he stuck fast to his prize, for all that.

Dropping the boathook, he tucked the bundle under his arm, leaped down from the box, and bolted for the trees.

He stopped at last, panting and breathless, in a little clearing in the wood. It had been a narrow escape, but he had done it. All he had to do now was to get the unlucky cartoon, put the essays back in the pocket, sneak back with the blazer, and chuck it—

Tubby's musings suddenly ended. He had time now to look at the bundle, and as he drew it from under his arm he jumped.

"Oh!" he panted. "Oh—oh crikey!"

It wasn't Mr. Dalton's blazer at all. The bundle was Mr. Dalton's flannel trousers! In the scurry and flurry and alarm Tubby had hooked the wrong fish. Instead of bagging the blazer he had bagged the bags!

Tubby Muffin almost wept at the disappointing discovery. All his trouble, all his risky striving, had come to nothing.

"Oh dear!" groaned Tubby. "What shall I do now?"

There seemed only one thing to do. Mr. Dalton had to have his trousers back, and he simply dare not risk going to the hut window again.

So Tubby made up his mind to abandon the risky enterprise. He rolled up the trousers and crept nearer to the hut. He could see the open window clearly now, and, taking a deep breath, Tubby gripped the bundle and pitched it with all his force towards the window, his next intention being to bolt from the perilous spot.

But again his luck was out. Instead of even reaching the hut, the trousers, flying through the air, caught against the branch of a tree and hung there, swaying in the breeze. And just then Tubby heard a footstep on the woodland path.

He popped down behind a thicket just in time. Next moment a figure hove into view—the figure of a dingy, ragged tramp. He was not a pleasant-looking individual either, and Tubby was thankful he had hidden.

The next moment Tubby's sudden fear was realised. The tramp sighted the swaying trousers and stopped, his jaw dropping.

"Blow me!" Tubby heard him exclaim. "Blow me if that there ain't a pair of trousers! Might be growin' on the bloomin' tree! Well, this 'ere beats it!"

He unhooked the swaying garments and examined them. Then he grinned and glanced cautiously about him.

"Strike a bloke pink!" he gloated. "If this 'ere ain't a stroke of bloomin' luck for 'Erbert 'Iggs! A-growin' on the blinkin' tree like! Fair arskin' ter be picked! Strike me pink!"

With another cautious glance about him, Mr. Herbert Higgs rolled up the trousers, shoved them under his arm, and departed hurriedly.

"Oh!" gasped Tubby Muffin. "Oh lor! That's done it!"

The dreadful thing had happened in a matter of seconds, and Tubby had had no time to think what to do. And what could he do now? To go after the unsavoury rascal was more than Tubby dare think of doing, and if he shouted he would bring Dicky Dalton on the scene.

There was only one thing Tubby dare do, and he did it.

He gave a deep, deep groan of dismay, and then, like the Arabs of old, he silently stole away.

CHAPTER 3.

Awkward!

"ANY of you kids seen Mr. Dalton?"

It was after six o'clock, and Jimmy Silver & Co. were sunning themselves on the Classical steps, tea being long over. They grinned as Bulkeley, captain of Rookwood, asked them the question. Quite a number of people had been inquiring about Mr. Dalton.

"Not since the match," said Jimmy Silver. "He was there, I know!"

"And he had his towel and bathing costume," added Raby. "I don't think he stayed long at the match, Bulkeley."

"He was to have been at the cricket meeting at six," frowned Bulkeley. "And the Head's asking for him, too."

"The Head? Is that why the Beak was looking so waxy?" grinned Jimmy Silver. "He passed us just now—"

"As a matter of fact it is," said Bulkeley, smiling. "Mr. Dalton should have taken tea at five with the Head and Mrs. Chisholm. He didn't turn up, and the Head's a bit upset about it. It's queer!"

"I say, let's hope nothing's happened, Bulkeley," said Newcome, in sudden alarm. "If he went bathing, and—"

"You young ass! Mr. Dalton swims like a fish! Don't talk rot! He must have come back from the river ages ago!" laughed the skipper, and he walked on.

"Fancy Dicky Dalton giving a Head's invite to tea the go-by," grinned Lovell. "No wonder the Beak was waxy! I say—Hullo, here's Tubby! Perhaps Tubby knows where Dalton is—he usually knows everything!"

Tubby Muffin came rolling up to the chums, looking the picture of woe. As a matter of fact, Tubby was worried—very worried. He was beginning to realise what a plight Mr. Dalton would find himself in—without his trousers. To a junior it would be a lark to have to return to school in costume and a jacket. A senior even might not make much fuss about it—at least, he would return in costume and jacket without much loss to his dignity. But it was different for a master.

Mr. Dalton could scarcely return without his trousers. The headmaster would be scandalised and very angry if Mr. Dalton walked in wearing only a costume, shoes, and a blazer. Moreover, there was Mr. Dalton's dignity to be considered. He would be the laughing-stock of the school if he did return thus. Both Houses would laugh about it for terms—even Tubby saw that now.

Mr. Dalton would not dare to return as he was.

He blinked dismally at the Fistical Four.

"I—I say, I don't know where he is—of course I don't!" he gasped in great alarm. "W-w-why should you think I know, Lovell? Because I don't. If—if anybody's bagged Mr. Dalton's trousers it isn't me!"

"Eh?"

"Wha-what?"

They blinked in amazement at the fatuous Tubby.

"M-mum-Mr. Dalton's trousers!" echoed Jimmy Silver blankly. "What on earth—Great pip! You haven't been playing tricks on Dicky Dalton, have you, you be-nighted ass?"

"Of—of course not, Jimmy," gasped Tubby. "Aren't I telling you I know nothing about Dalton's bags! In fact, I don't even know somebody has pinched his bags. As for knowing anything about a tramp, I don't. In any case, it wasn't my fault!"

"Why, you—you fat idiot! What—"

"It's my belief something's happened to him, Jimmy," said Tubby, eyeing Jimmy apprehensively. "He went bathing, you know. I—I don't believe he's staying away because his trousers are pinched at all," added Tubby cautiously. "He—he must be drowned, or something. I—I say, Jimmy, hadn't you better go to the—the river and see what's happened? I suggested that to that beast Bulkeley, you know, and he kicked me."

They gazed blankly and fixedly at Tubby. That the fat youth knew what had happened to Mr. Dalton was only too clear to them.

"You—you burbling chunk of lunacy!" gasped Lovell, catching Tubby by the ear. "What have you done, you fat fool? D'you mean to say you've had the nerve to bag Dalton's trousers—"

"Yow! Leggo! Haven't I told you I didn't? It wasn't my fault the blessed boathook caught his bags instead of his coat! And it wasn't my fault that beastly tramp came along—"

"Oh, great pip! Let the fat ass go now, and come on!" snapped Jimmy Silver in alarm. "It's pretty clear Tubby's been up to something with Dicky's clobber. Quick!"

Jimmy Silver started off at a run, and his chums followed, leaving Tubby shivering with fright. How they had guessed anything, Tubby could not imagine!

But they had—in fact, Jimmy Silver had a fairly clear idea of Tubby's game, at least, and he ran hard. If Dicky Dalton was unable to return because Tubby Muffin had bagged his trousers, then the sooner Dalton was rescued from his predicament the better—for Tubby and all concerned.

They soon reached the river, and Jimmy Silver & Co. scouted round cautiously. They did not want to be seen. If they sighted Dalton they would return and report the discovery. There was no sign of the master about the meadow, however, and, slackening caution, they approached the bathing-hut.

They reached the doorway and blinked inside carelessly, quite sure now that Mr. Dalton was not there. But he was!

The juniors jumped as they sighted the master. He was seated on a locker, smoking his pipe. He seemed to be



Mr. Dalton was running towards the hut, so Tubby made a desperate grab for the coat with the boathook!

quite calm; but Jimmy did not fail to note the glint in his august eye.

"Ah! No, no—don't run away, Silver," said Mr. Dalton quietly, though his voice fairly shook. "I was sure someone would turn up, but I must confess I did not expect the ragers themselves."

"R-ragers!" gasped Jimmy.

"Yes. Perhaps you will now be good enough to enable me to return to Rookwood, Silver."

"Oh crumbs! But—but—"

"Delay will only serve to increase your punishment, Silver," said Mr. Dalton, his voice almost crackling. "Possibly you look upon this as a record rag—a great jape! I do not, nor will Dr. Chisholm. Return my—my property to me at once!"

"But—but it wasn't us, sir!" gasped Jimmy. "We—we haven't touched your—your trousers, sir!"

"How did you know my trousers were in question, Silver? I did not mention them!"

"Oh crumbs!"

They were undone—Jimmy, in his nervousness, had fairly given the fact away that they knew!

"But we haven't taken them, ~~etc.~~ We don't know where they are!" babbled Lovell. "Honestly, sir, we don't know—"

"Be silent, Lovell! Silver, as ringleader, I hold you mainly responsible. If my flannels are gone, then you will return with all speed to Rookwood. You will get a fresh pair from my wardrobe, wrap them up, and return with them to me! If you allow this—this outrage to become public, I—I will never overlook it. You other three boys will go to my study and wait there until I can take you all before the Head!"

Tubby Muffin was hanging round the gateway when they got back.

Bump!

The astonished Tubby Muffin found himself strewn across the gravel.

"There, you benighted ass!" gasped Lovell. "Jump on him! Got us blamed for his footling japes! Us to go before the Head, and he did it—boned Dalton's trousers, the—"

Words failed Lovell, but there was no time to waste, and they scudded on to the House. Three minutes later Jimmy was rushing out again with a parcel, and it was fully twenty minutes later that Mr. Dalton, in new trousers and a towering rage, joined them in his study.

"Now," snapped Mr. Dalton—"now I am ready to take you before the Headmaster to answer for this—this abominable outrage!"

"But—but we didn't—it wasn't—"

"Enough! You can answer the charge to the Head, Silver! Come!"

But it was not to be, fortunately, for Jimmy Silver & Co. could never have sneaked on Tubby, and they really were in a pickle. Just then, however, the door opened, and Tubby Muffin crawled in, his fat little knees knocking together, his face apprehensive and woeful.

"Well, Muffin—"

"Oh dear! It—it's about your trousers, sir! Jimmy—I mean these fellows, didn't bag them—it was me, sir! Oh dear!" gasped Tubby.

"Wha-what? Muffin—"

Tubby stuttered and stammered, but he got the sad facts out somehow. Fearful funk that he was, Tubby was not the sort to let other fellows suffer in his place. He had deemed it best to own up—very wisely.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Dicky Dalton at last. "You—you young rascal! However, I will make allowances for your stupidity and will not take you before the Head, Muffin. I shall punish you myself—most severely—and my property must be paid for out of your future pocket-money. You other boys may go!"

And Jimmy Silver & Co. went—smiling. They were waiting the passage when the hapless Tubby came out.

"Had it bad, Tubby?" said Jimmy sympathetically. "Well, you were a fearful ass, you know—frightful!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!" groaned Tubby. "I've had a fearful lickin'! Ow, ow, ow! And I'll get a worse when he finds that rotten cartoon. Ow, ow, ow!"

"My dear man, don't worry about that," said Jimmy, with a chuckle. "You see, I've destroyed it long ago!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"When you stood up in class this morning," smiled Jimmy. "I saw the giddy danger, and I whipped the drawing off your desk under your nose, Tubby. It's burned in our study fire, old chap. I did it to save your bacon, you know. I let you run on to teach you a lesson, though I didn't dream you'd run to bagging Dicky's trousers!"

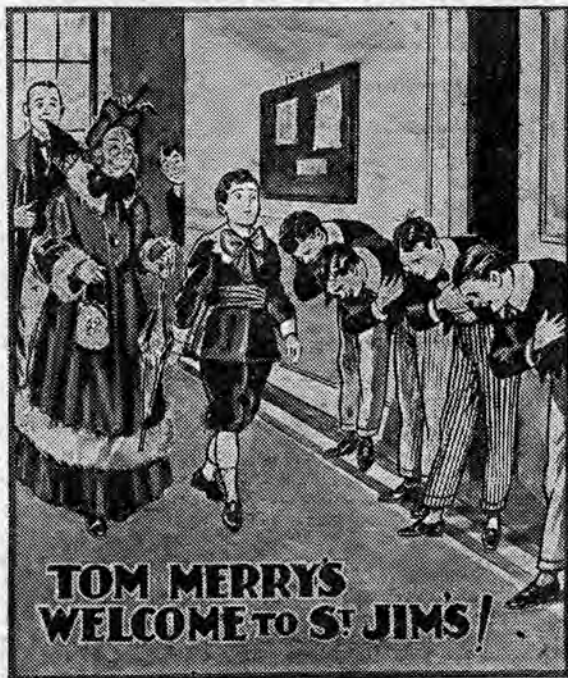
Tubby almost fainted.

Jimmy Silver walked away, laughing, and Tubby, after glaring after them in speechless wrath and indignation, rolled off to his own study to nurse his wrath and pains there.

THE END.

(Don't forget, boys, there'll be another ripping Rookwood yarn in next week's GEM. Order your copy NOW.)

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THE WOW OF THE WEEK! NEXT WEEK'S "GEM"!

Have a squint at next week's cover on the left. What's that? Why is Tom Merry in velveteens again? Well, the answer to that will keep till next Wednesday! And then it will arrive in the form of a tophole story by Martin Clifford, called:

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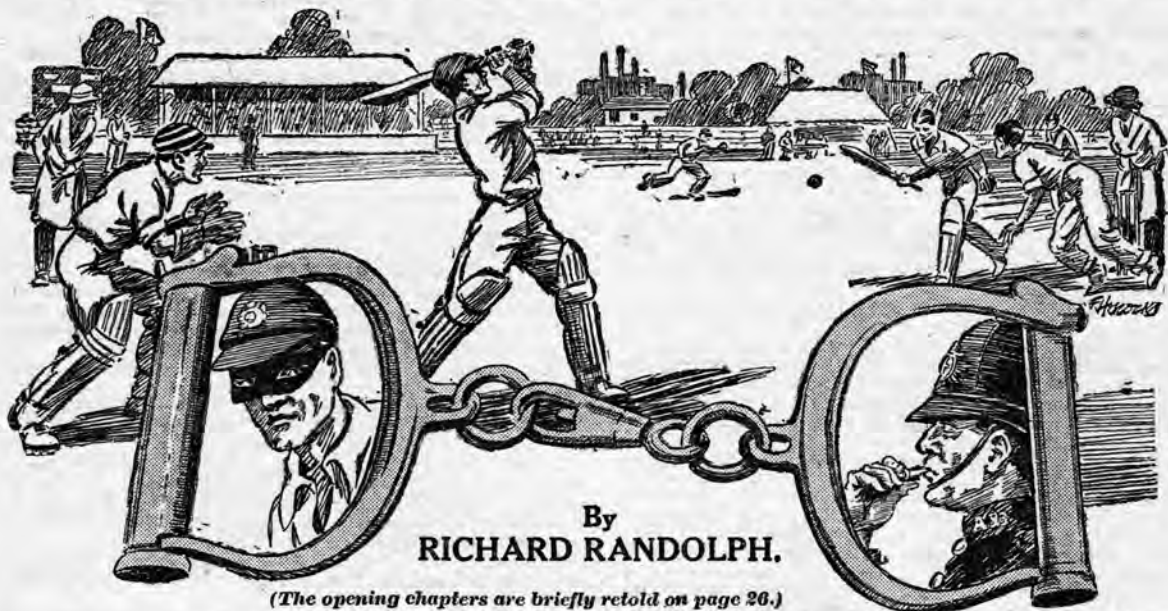
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THE CRICKETER CRACKSMAN!



By
RICHARD RANDOLPH.

(The opening chapters are briefly retold on page 26.)

The Knock-Out!

HYDE was in a hurry. Rod was not. He counted it wisest to find out the measure of his enemy. He felt sure that the yellow streak of fear that he had recognised in Ralph was not in this fellow. There was much behind his swank.

Hyde hit hard, and he could use both hands for his punches. He was not without cleverness in defence, but he relied more upon the guarding arm than upon the elusiveness that was Rod's big asset. In the long run the quicksilver fighter, if he can also punch, has a pull over the man who is less mobile and tricky.

Three-minute rounds, with one-minute intervals, had been agreed upon. Though there was plenty of punching, nothing much happened in the first round. Most of Hyde's blows failed to find any mark, but two got home, and both had venom in them. Most of Rod's were guarded; but one piledriver, only half intercepted, took Hyde under the chin and made him throw up his head and snort.

There was more doing in the second round. Rod made in. Hyde clinched after the worst American fashion.

"Break away!" shouted more than one voice. But the voice of the referee was not among them, and Horry Hiam did not move from his post to part the two.

Rod worked his left more or less free, and, with Hyde still gripping him, punched up hard and quickly. He could not get the full value of those jabs; but still, they hurt confoundingly, and Hyde broke away of his own accord.

He staggered as he went back. Rod jumped in and sent him to the floor.

"Time!" called Geering.

Two and a half minutes instead of three! Some there knew it, but none protested.

The half-minute deducted from the round was added to the breathing interval—which may have been Geering's notion of fairness. But that Geering had any such notion would have been hard to believe by anyone who knew him. Joel Geering was an extremely hard-boiled egg.

Hyde seemed fit enough for anything when he advanced again. But so did Rod.

And Rod smiled, while Hyde's face was contorted. The smiling fighter is usually a dangerous man.

They mixed again, and again Hyde clinched. But this time Rod got his left out of the grip, and its thud-thud-thud

upon Hyde's back in the neighbourhood of the kidneys forced the older fellow to break away.

As he did that he saw his chance, and his right shot out and caught Rod on the chin.

Rod toppled backwards—lay prone.

Geering rushed the count. It was not one—pause—two—pause—three, but one, two, three—like that.

"He's done!" roared someone.

"He's not done!" shouted Ginger.

Seven—and Rod was on his feet.

Before even so quick a tallyman as Geering could have rapped out eight he had made in.

He feinted for Hyde's jaw with his right, drew his guard, and got in a piledriver on the mark.

Hyde sagged a little back, then lurched forward and came down face to floor.

"Count as slowly as you know how," said Rod to Geering. "You're more than one pace, I guess. But you'll have to count him out!"

BARE FISTS FIGHT IN A CELLAR!

Hyde didn't mean to spare Rod Rodney; he meant to knock him into the middle of next week. But when the fight was over it was Hyde who had got the hiding!

A murmur of applause sounded. A few there were sportsmen, anyway. A few more found themselves sportsmen for the moment.

"No good!" muttered Geering to Horry Hiam.

"You're right. I'd like to get hold of that kid an' make of him what could be made. There's the stuff in him."

"Not a dog's chance! There ain't the stuff for our game, I reckon. You couldn't hold him, Horry."

Geering did not even go through the formality of counting. Hyde lay dead to the world while the seconds and the minutes raced. He was still prostrate, though his body had begun to twitch queerly, when into the cellar burst the youngster who so short a time ago had been a mere novice to crime, but had now been blooded.

He pushed his way towards Geering.

"It's all up!" he gasped. "That Barslake affair has gone west, an' the cops—"

Geering smote him hard upon the mouth, silencing him. Not many had heard in the buzz. But Harry Hiam had. He glanced round in fear at Ginger.

To the great majority of those assembled the hidden activities of the place were known. Perhaps one in five of the crowd had no knowledge at all of them. But most of those were too slow of wit to glean anything from what they might have heard, and none of them was very near Geering, anyway. It was Ginger whom Harry feared.

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But Ginger showed no sign of having been put wise to anything out the ordinary way. He was patting Rod on the back, smiling, seemingly blind and deaf to the interruption.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. But his relief was not justified. Ginger had heard, and his mind had made a big jump to a conclusion that somehow was not new to it.

For the Second Eleven!

ROD was asked to play for the Second Eleven of Norlandshire v. Yorkshire Second, and, having learned from John Redgrave that there would be no difficulty about his getting leave, had accepted eagerly. He was not quite sure what he might have done had leave been refused him; for he believed that he could make good in county cricket, and though that career did not promise a fortune, it meant at least more than he could hope to earn at the mill for a long time yet, and was far more to his liking.

"You won't find anything put in your way, lad," said Redgrave. "Joseph Hyde is one of Norlandshire's best supporters. If it hadn't been for that I don't think his young hopeful would have been given the captaincy, though it's true that it would be hard to find another to take it on. Well, Alured can bat and field. I'll allow that. And if he can't get the best out of his men the committee must see it sooner or later, I suppose."

The appointment to the captaincy was public now. There were murmurings against it. In the Norchester clubs it was reported that Arthur Hereward's comment on hearing of it, as he lay coughing on his bed, had been: "That one! Well, I'll hope, but I can't believe in him!"

Among the pro's—and the Norlandshire team generally included as many as nine of the paid contingent—there was neither hope nor belief. They were not willing to be driven, and they could not see Alured Hyde as a leader.

"But we've got to do our best for Mr. Hereward's sake," Roger Rogers told some of them. "He won't die happy if the flag isn't kept flying, and it's getting near now. He's taken a turn for the worse. May not last a month, they tell me."

It may have been because of the veteran's words that Norlandshire won their first three matches off the reel. But all three were against teams they were used to beating—Somerset, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire. And in each case they had been on top from the first. In such circumstances very little leadership is required, and Hyde was not out to provoke trouble with the men. He knew Hereward's tactics, and used them. He did not change the order of going in. Red Harman made a century v. Somerset, and Rogers had a great match v. Northants, getting fifteen wickets, the biggest bag of his career.

A fine start for Hyde! Everything in the garden seemed lovely, until he thought of Rod Rodney.

That thought seemed to catch him by the throat. He felt that he could never be on terms with himself until he had humbled Rod.

At first he was annoyed by the news that his enemy was to have a chance in the Second Eleven. Whatever he might say, he knew that this was but a stepping-stone to speedy county honours. But when he thought it out, and talked it over with Ralph Redgrave, he saw his opportunity.

"Keep him down, Ally!" advised Ralph. "Don't put him on to bowl unless you have to. There's always the excuse that his style is very like Rogers'. Send the young blighter in last. Find out some place in the field that don't suit him, and shove him there."

"You're not such a mug as you look, Ralph," replied Alured Hyde.

Ralph would have found it hard to explain why he hated Rod. He cared little about his father and mother, yet he could not bear to see them growing fonder of Rod. He ardently desired to get away from home. Yet the fact that it had become home to Rod made him feel bitter.

Hyde had put Ralph's name forward for a place in the Second Eleven. The selectors had not got even as far as considering Ralph. They had made their choice from some seventeen. If the other score or so who were mentioned had been placed, Ralph might just possibly have been as high as No. 19 among them—not higher. There were hundreds of better cricketers than he in the county, though, of course, many of them were not available, in any case.

"My word, this is a great day for us, Rod!" said Ginger Harman, as he and

Rod made their way together to the Norchester County Ground on the day which saw the beginning of the Norlandshire Second v. Yorkshire Second match.

"Does it satisfy all your ambitions to play for the Second, Ginger?" Rod asked, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Not jolly well likely! But it's a start."

"That's the way to look at it, I think. If I can't get a show for the county team this season, I shan't be keen on the Second next; but I'm keen enough to-day."

"I'd go on with the Second for ages if I saw my way to a place in the county team at the end; but if I can make good it won't be ages. Dick Jerrold's not as good as he was, and they say he only waits an offer of a coaching job at a big school to vamoose the ranch. He can't stand Hyde at any price."

"He doesn't seem to be all alone there," replied Rod.

"Have you seen anything of the boulder since you knocked him out in that cellar of Horry Hiam's?" Ginger asked.

Rod shook his head.

"I'm not nuts on that place," remarked Ginger.

He had said nothing to Rod about what he had overheard on the night of the encounter between him and Hyde. He did not mean to say anything now, unless Rod gave some intimation that he had also heard.

"I don't like it, either," Rod answered. "Shan't go there again."

"Shan't go down again myself," Ginger returned. "But I don't know about the saloon. I'd like to pick up the boxing game."

"You'd soon do that. We ought to be able to find some other show, too."

"Well, Harry Hiam was a pal of mine at school, and he's a chap that don't seem to have many friends. I'd like to give him a bit of a lift if I could."

"Good notion!" said Rod. "I thought it was decent of him to second me, and he really seemed to want me to win, too."

"You bet he did! He's rather a sorrowful sort of blighter, but his heart's in the right place."

They talked no more of Harry Hiam then, for they had reached the gates of the big ground. It was thrilling to be passed in as players.

Among those already in the dressing-room were two whom Ginger knew. The rest came from other parts of the county. With the exception of the captain, the whole side was new to anything above club cricket.

The skipper was an amateur of over fifty, an old chum of Hereward's in the county team, not worth many runs at his best now, slow though sure in the field, but knowing the game thoroughly.

He had before him notes as to the qualifications of these ten colts of whom he had to make the best, and he had studied them carefully.

"Wicket-keeper, eh?" he said to Ginger. "Can you bat?"

"Not a bit!" answered Ginger cheerfully.

"All right, you'll be number ten—before me, but after everyone else. Rodney—left-hand slow bowler, with a fast one now and then—that's useful—right-hand bat. Where did you learn your cricket, my boy?"

"At Nunwick, sir; but I don't suppose you'll have heard of it."

"I have, though; and played there, before you were hatched out. Good little school—better than many of the bigger ones. Mr. Theophilus still Head there?"

"Yes, but he'll be retiring in a term or two."

"Pity his sort ever have to retire! You fellows owe a lot to him."

Well Rod knew it! His heart leaped up at meeting this man who had known the dear old Head. He was no end bucked.

Which was just what James Revell had hoped. He had been told that there was no likelier youngster than Rod among the half-score, and he wanted to start him well.

"I shall send you in first with Beal," he said. "Beal had an average of over forty for Carnton last season. We haven't too many on the side with strong batting credentials. Might have filled up with men over thirty, who would be sure to get some runs; but it's the youngsters we want, and Beal's not above twenty-one."

Then he called to Beal, and made him and Rod known to one another. Beal seemed a nice fellow, though a little in the rough. He and Rod were talking in friendly fashion when the Yorkshire men arrived.

They were not famous players, these men from the White Rose county; but three or four of them had played for Yorkshire on

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

After his father's death ROD RODNEY goes to live with the Redgraves at Norchester, a mill town in the North of England. The first night there Rod and RALPH REDGRAVE go to a boxing saloon kept by HARRY HIAM and his son HARRY. In a scrap there, Ralph fouls Rod because he cannot beat him. Rod meets ALURED HYDE, Ralph's cousin, who is son of a millowner and captain of Norlandshire cricket team. Hyde gets up a team to play the mill team but he is bowled easily by Rod. In revenge he forces Rod into a bare fist fight in Horry Hiam's cellar!

(Now read on.)



Rod fainted for Hyde's jaw with his right, drew his guard, and got in a pile-driver on the mark. Hyde sagged and lurched forward!

occasion, and only one or two were as young as most of the Norlandshire crowd. Moreover, as the home players knew, all of them had been passed as worth a good trial by George Hirst, and everyone who cares for cricket is aware that George's judgment is esteemed as highly as his manhood. It would be impossible to say more than that. Few players have won such universal affection as has Hirst.

He was not with the team. His job at this period of the season was that of coaching the Eton boys.

A few minutes more, and Revell and the Yorkshire skipper went out to toss. There were not a hundred spectators yet, and most of the Norlandshire colts rather preferred that few should be there to see how they fared.

Revell lost the toss, and the Yorkshiresmen went in.

The start was rather slow. Rod was one of the first pair of bowlers, but made no immediate impression on a pitch that favoured the batsmen. Revell was satisfied thus far, however. His lads were fielding well—not a slacker among them. Had there been such this would have been his last as well as his first match for the county second. Ginger shaped capably behind the wicket. Only twenty runs came in half an hour, then Beal, at long leg, caught one of the batsmen off Rod. But Rod realised that he had not earned that wicket. The hit might well have gone over the ropes, and a shorter man than the Carnton colt could not have reached it.

His second capture was better value. He induced a hefty-looking Tyke to put up a ball near the wicket, and the veteran captain, fielding at point, made no mistake about it as it squirmed downwards.

Bedford and Turner, the two most experienced men in the team, were thus brought together; and together they stayed till after lunch.

Apart from Red, the bowling of Norlandshire Second was very moderate. There were two youngsters who might be good in time, but had a lot to learn first, and three more whom Revell put down as mere club bowlers at best—mechanics of the game.

Bedford reached his hundred not long after lunch. There was now something like a decent gathering of onlookers, for it was early-closing day in Norchester. In the pavilion were many old hands—men who had played and watched the

game for a generation. These looked eagerly for signs of the hallmarked article among the youngsters in the field.

They could pick out but three possibles for the county team yet—Ginger Harman, Rodney, and Beal. Most of them knew how well Beal could bat, and saw in him now a great field.

With his score 105 Bedford slammed one back to Rod at chest level—as awkward a catch to take as well might be. The leather passed through Rod's hands to strike him on the breastbone, then was gripped firmly before it could fall. And a cheer rang out from the ring.

Turner stayed some time longer, but failed to reach the hundred, and no one else did very much. The total was 282, however, and as the innings did not end till after five o'clock Norlandshire's chance of a win seemed small.

By drawing of stumps it appeared to have faded away to nothing.

Up to the fall of the ninth wicket it was the merest procession.

Rod was run out without scoring—out by a matter of inches only. It was his own call, so that he could not blame Beal; and he himself was really not to be blamed, for the ability to snatch runs that others would not try for is a big asset. Revell did not blame him.

Then Beal, with only three to his credit, succumbed to a slip catch off a stroke genuinely worth four. It was one of those catches that look impossible, yet are made somehow.

Nos. 3 to 9 came and went without doing a thing to redeem the situation. None of them was a duffer; but most were nervous, and at least two were the victims of misfortune.

Ralph Redgrave had managed to get down to the ground for the innings. He had exulted secretly when Rod was dismissed, and he was pleased with the later happenings.

"The dashed committee wouldn't give me a chance!" he muttered to himself.

He wondered that the greybeards and whiteheads who formed the great majority of the pavilion gathering seemed so little troubled. None of them quite liked the turn of events, naturally; but most of them understood that it did not mean all that it might seem to.

With nine down for 21 the skipper walked out.

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"Good old Jimmy!" said one of the old hands near Ralph.

"Old crook! Never heard of him doing anything," Ralph muttered.

"I'll back Jimmy not to be No. 3 in a hat trick," said another of the old brigade.

Jimmy was not. He put the ball neatly away for a single, and Ginger faced a bowler who had taken five wickets for 7 runs.

Ginger hit him for four!

Well, perhaps it was not exactly a hit in the ordinary sense. But somehow Ginger's bat met the ball and deflected it to the on without the holder of the bat realising just how he had done it. And the ball went to the boundary.

It did Ginger no end of good. He was under no delusion. He did not believe he could do the same thing again. But he had hit a four!

Now he devoted all his energy to keeping up his wicket, while James Revell scored singles and twos, and once a four to the off that reminded his old pals of his younger days.

At call of time the total was 49 for 9—Revell 22, Ginger 6. "You're going to make a bat, Harman," said the man with the iron-grey hair, as he and the slight lad with the head of flame walked back to the pavilion together.

Ginger could not answer with his lips. But his eyes were eloquent.

Next morning the first Yorkshire bowler put on proved badly off colour. Revell hit a long hop for three. Ginger got a full pitch right on his bat and slammed it for 4. There came a delivery all but wide to leg. Ginger chased it, made a most agricultural stroke, and scored another 4. He had made 14—his top score in any match to date.

But that was the end of it. A bailer from another bowler disposed of Revell, and Norlandshire Second were all out for 60.

"We follow on, I take it?" said Revell to the visiting captain.

"You do," was the reply, a smile accompanying it.

That smile was not in evidence at lunch, when Rod Rodney and Conrad Beal were still in possession, and the total was 231 without a wicket down!

Neither batsman had given a chance. They had met some really good bowling on its merits, and had patted a lot of indifferent stuff and a little that was frankly bad. Rod was now 118, Beal 108. The Carlton man made the more spectacular hits; but Rod had strokes that he lacked.

The few onlookers clapped and cheered as they went in. The old hands in the pavilion said gracious things. It was a big day for both.

"I'm hoping that we shall be in the county team together one day, Rodney," said Beal, laying a big, work-calloused hand on Rod's shoulder as they passed to their places at the luncheon table. "With your bowling I reckon you're a cert. I think I've a decent chance. When we're county mates we shan't forget this morning, eh?"

"Rather not!" replied Rod. "Oh, I do hope we both get there, old man!"

"You will, anyway. I say, if you see me going anyway wrong with the victuals just for me in the ribs, will you? I ain't used to swell meals."

This was hardly a swell meal. The lunch was simple enough, and Beal did not need to be jogged in the ribs, though he did cram his mouth to an extent not usual in polite circles.

Ginger sat on Rod's other side, and the three of them were happy—far happier than seven more of the team, for the three had made good. Rod, without a chance at the Yorkshire tail-enders, had taken six for 55 and topped the

century; Beal had been the most conspicuous field, no matter where he was placed, and had also scored a hundred; Ginger had caught two and stumped two batsmen, and only allowed one ball to go past him for byes, and he had the highest score of his career thus far—but that was not a matter for bragging. What counted far more than the runs was what Mr. Revell had said to him as they came in.

The two young batsmen went out full of confidence and resolution after lunch. They knew that more runs were required of them if there was to be any hope of winning the match; but they also knew that only quick runs would be of any use for that, and were sure Mr. Revell would not blame them if they got out in forcing the game.

He had thought of telling them so. But it occurred to him that far more important than any prospect of pulling this match out of the fire, was the chance to find out whether Beal and Rodney had the right sort of matter above the level of the eyebrows.

If they had that they would size up the situation; if not—well, they might both still prove useful county players, but not as useful as they would be if their skipper did not always have to do their thinking for them. The man who knows better than his captain is no end of a nuisance, of course; but the thoughtful cricketer is an asset.

They saw it! He was sure from the first over. Without taking undue risk, they set about the bowling, and in very quick time they added over forty runs.

To the surprise of the men in the field Rod and Beal were beckoned from their wickets when Norlandshire led by only a bare hundred.

"I wouldn't have taken the risk, Revell," said the Yorkshire leader. "You've declared, leaving us plenty of time to make the runs, and you know we have the men to make them."

"If they are allowed to make them, old man!" replied Revell.

He had not much hope of a victory thus; but it was impossible to win by carrying on with the innings. It might be worth while to see how his team of colts would respond to the spur of a desperate effort.

Pity he had but one bowler of class! But the others must do their best, and with good work in the field and a bit of luck the unexpected might happen.

"I took you off in the first innings because I didn't want to tire you out, Rodney," he said. "But I reckon you'll have to keep an end going right up to the finish—whatever it may be—this time. I can't depend on one of the others for a wicket."

"I don't easily get tired, sir," was Rod's answer.

It was a difficult thing that was asked of him. He could not hope to bowl all the enemy out. There was no use in merely keeping them quiet. If he were to get wickets he must risk runs. He saw that much would hang upon the field work.

And there it was that the otherwise undistinguished colts proved themselves cricketers. Not a catch was missed; and even when 50 had gone up without a wicket down, not a run had been given away.

Then Rod had four wickets, all caught, in quick succession, and before the score had reached 60 he tumbled over a middle stump.

The other bowlers had all been given a chance. Not one of them had looked like being dangerous. Now Revell himself went on.

(Can Norlandshire win the match? Rod is the only bowler on the side, but will Revell do the unexpected? Whatever you do, don't miss next week's fine instalment of this thrilling yarn!)

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